



The District

Without power
...we are nothing



WRITTEN AS A 'NOVELLA IN A DAY'
ON APRIL 4th 2020

The District

written as a
Novel-in-a-Day



THE DISTRICT

Originally published: 2020

Copyright © 2020 Various Authors
J.D. Salt, Dan Hallberg, B. Morris Allen
Jeanette Everson, Terence MacManus, Dawn Oshima
Nick Calvert, Adela Torres, Simon Horn
S.R. Martin, Mirela Vasconcelos, Cassandra Lee Yieng
Story by: Tim Rogers

The moral rights of the authors have been asserted.

*All characters and events in this publication are
fictitious and any resemblance to real persons,
living, dead, or trapped in a bunker, is purely coincidental*

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons
Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License.
You are free to share (to copy, distribute and transmit the work)
under the following conditions:

Attribution — You must attribute the work in the manner specified
by the author or licensor (but not in any way that suggests that
they endorse you or your use of the work).

Noncommercial — You may not use this work for commercial purposes.

No Derivative Works — You may not alter, transform, or build upon this
work.

For more details, visit:

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

Original cover photograph by: Tim Rogers

www.novelinaday.com

Also by Novel-in-a-Day:

The Dark
Lunar520
Made Man
Section7
Marshal Law
3 Ghosts
Start Wearing Purple
Auld Lang Syne
Butterfly Dawn

www.novelinaday.com

sponsored by
Literature & Latte, creators of Scrivener



for Montrée
a wonderful person
lost far too soon
we miss you

Time is no substitute for talent

This NiaD was a special edition, run in addition to our normal annual event in response to the social distancing and mandatory isolation imposed on us by the global Covid19 viral pandemic of 2020. It was quickly prepared, even by our standards. But as we're fond of saying around here, time is no substitute for talent...

The book you are about to read was written over the course of a single day in April 2020. For those unfamiliar with the concept of Novel-in-a-Day, it's simple:

- A skeleton of a plot is worked out in advance of the day
- That plot is broken into sections, which are divided amongst the participants randomly
- The writers have most of the rest of the day to write and return their chapters, working with no knowledge of the wider story or their place in it.

Tim

April 4, 2020

The District

chapter one

J.D. Salt

AUGUST 30, 2019

5:21 am

Rocky Creek Park, Washington, DC

His soaked t-shirt clinging to his chest in the cloying pre-dawn heat, President Andrew Gray crested the hill that led to the planetarium, his retinue of Secret Service agents and Jeffrey Palmer, his Chief of Staff, dutifully puffing along to match his brisk pace. The run was an inconvenience, of course—the security arrangements alone were a big ask, not to mention the sudden change of plans and disappointment it caused for the Washingtonians that counted on the central section of the park for their early morning exercise. Sometimes, though, he just *had* to get outside, the five-figure treadmill in the White House gym no match for the pre rush-hour fresh-air of the National Mall or the scent of green growing things, the feel of the breeze, however faint and hot against his skin. The exhilaration of yesterday’s back-home campaign kick-off needed the outdoors to dull its edge.

As the entourage cleared the canopy of trees shading the

road and entered the parking lot for the planetarium, Gray slowed his pace and pointed at the sky. “Whoah.”

Broad ribbons of green light and danced and flickered above the horizon in the northern sky, at times making it appear as if the night had caught fire. Gray glanced over at his Chief of Staff. “I’m presuming since my phone hasn’t blown up, that this isn’t something I should be concerned about. I didn’t realize we were due for a southerly visit from the Northern Lights.”

Palmer shrugged as he retrieved his phone for a quick text-check. “I don’t recall anything being mentioned, but then we’ve been deep in the weeds with final budget negotiations.”

Gray smiled. “Well, I’ll take it as momentous sign that I’ll be the first President in twelve years to be re-elected. The show will make for some nice coverage on the morning news, that’s for sure.” He briefly debated calling Lizzy; on the one hand his daughter would be over-joyed at the unexpected event, the science geek that she was, but ever since she’d turned 14, that pleasure had been matched with an equally-strong displeasure at being woken any earlier than absolutely necessary.

Gray slowed to a stop and took in the sight as he filmed the display with his phone. It was moments like these that made him wish for the slower days as Indiana Governor, when he could linger more than a minute in the presence of one of nature’s works of art.

“Mr. President?”

Gray turned his attention to Palmer. The look on the man’s face told him everything he needed to know. To delay much longer had a price—shorten his run or sacrifice precious time with Lucy and Lizzy before the latter left for school. He sighed. “All right, let’s go.”

After a shower and private time with with his wife and daughter, the President's morning proceeded as usual: fifteen minutes for Palmer to walk him through the day's itinerary (the highlights: sign-and-snaps for the hard-fought *No Worker Left Behind* and *Families First* bills, centerpieces of his Indianapolis campaign kick-off), then the daily intelligence breakfast briefing with Alice Gardner, Director of National Intelligence, Dave Clark, National Security Council Advisor, and Michelle Bennett, Secretary of State. Aside from some routine communication interference associated with the increased solar flare activity, the appearance of the Lights this far south didn't warrant mention in the briefing.

9:37 am

East Room

“—its core, this bill will ensure that, as industry inevitably changes, no American will be forced into chronic unemployment or perpetual underemployment.” President Gray paused, surveying the room packed with press, business, civic, and labor leaders, the big-state Governors of California, Florida, New York, and Texas, the small-state Governors of Idaho, South Dakota, Vermont, and West Virginia, Congressional leadership and most of his cabinet behind him. The passage of the bill was good policy and a seminal bipartisan accomplishment more than two years in the making, an accomplishment opposed by both the farther right (because it went too far) and the farther left (because it didn't go far enough) which meant it was pragmatic and good for most of the country.

“Perhaps most importantly ...”

The room's lights flickered, then dimmed for a long

second. They flickered again before surging to a brighter level before finally settling down again. Gray glanced over at Palmer, barely missing a beat. “Jeff, we did mail that electric bill out on time, right?”

The audience tittered and chuckled before Gray moved on with the ceremony.

9:57 am

White House Corridor

“Anybody know what that was all about?” Gray asked as he, Palmer, Press Secretary Karl Bailey and two of his staff, and two Secret Service agents headed for a 10:00 meet-and-greet in the Oval Office.

Agent Evers spoke up. “Apparently it’s not specific to the White House, sir. PEPCO’s indicating sporadic anomalies that appear to be affecting older buildings. No reported outages. They’re attributing it to solar flare activity.”

“Solar flares? What about the rest of the country?” Palmer asked.

“Operations indicates that preliminary reports suggest the impact is nationwide,” Evers replied. “We’ve been informed the White House back-up generators are ready if the power goes out.”

“All right. Jeff, will you arrange for a status report before my lunch with Michelle and the Lithuanian delegation?”

10:26 am

White House Corridor

“—well, somebody needs to check those microphones,” President Gray said, irritation clear in his voice. “Wireless or not, we can’t have them shocking dignitaries while the cameras are rolling. And make sure—”

“Excuse me, sir. Mr. President?”

Gray turned to see Dave Clarke, his NSA coming up the corridor behind them. “Dave?”

“NASA’s in the Situation Room. You might want to hear what they have to say.”

10:39 am

White House Situation Room

Gray studied the face of Bill Parsons, the NASA Administrator. “So let me see if I have this right. “This increased solar activity has gummed up communications with the International Space Station, and there may or may not have been spikes in the astronauts’ medical monitoring data before communications were lost. Correct?”

Parsons nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Gray pivoted his chair to face his National Security Adviser. “Dave, I know I’m not the sharpest tack in the box sometimes, but help me understand why this warrants a Presidential-level face-to-face right now, and in the Situation Room no less.”

Clarke glanced over at Parsons before beginning. “Well, Mr. President—”

But the opening of the door cut him off. Dan Richardson, Secretary of Defense, General Williams, Chair of the Joint Chief, Carl Evans, CIA Director, and Alice Gardner, Director of National Intelligence filed in, followed by Jeff Palmer. They took seats around the table as the lights began to flicker again.

Gray scanned the faces of the new arrivals. “Well, something tells me things are getting serious.”

Dan Richardson spoke up. “Sir,” he said as he scanned the faces at the table, “if I may?”

Gray nodded.

“It appears we have a growing problem of still unknown origins or potential scale, and the anomalies with the power grid, the ISS, and the increased static charge in the atmosphere are the first symptoms.”

“Are we talking natural or man-made?” Gray asked.

Richardson gestured toward Gardner. “Right now, Mr, President—”

Evans cut her off. “Sir, in the CIA’s opinion—”

Gray raised his hand. Patience wasn’t Evans’ strong suit, nor was playing second fiddle. “Hold up, Carl, I wanna get the overall picture first.”

Gardner continued. “Just after 5:00 am EDT, Earth began to be hit by solar-type radiation, causing the appearance of the Aurora Borealis as far south as Atlanta. The intensity of the radiation increased over the next few hours creating numerous and widespread minor problems with the electrical grid and communication systems. That gradual increase has continued, affecting the ISS and, apparently a handful of government and commercial satellites. We can’t yet determine any impacts beyond the loss of communication.

“A canvas of U.S. observatories studying solar activity indicates no solar flares of this magnitude had been forecasted for the next six months. Right now, there’s not enough information to rule in or rule out a natural phenomenon.”

“What about bad actors?” Gray asked.

Gardner glanced at Evans. “The near consensus is that none of the major players has the capacity to both generate an electromagnetic pulse of sufficient magnitude while also protecting their own critical infrastructure.”

“The North Koreans?” Gray said, his face grave. “They don’t have much to lose.”

Gardner gestured to Evans. The man sat up tall as he

leaned forward to speak. “Sir, while we’re not aware of any EMP program, they did place a large satellite in orbit just over three weeks ago. We’ve yet to confirm the initial intelligence, but it’s thought to have been the result of a collaboration between the Russians and the Chinese. If any rogue nation had nothing to lose, it would be the North Koreans.”

“Terrorists?” Gray asked out of obligation—he’d inferred the answer already.

Evans shook his head. “No group has that level of technological sophistication.”

Gray puffed out a breath. “Okay, so much for causes. What’s our critical systems and military readiness status?”

The lights flickered again as laptops were opened and smart phones consulted. After another moment, Gray spoke up. “General, how about we start with you?”

Williams pushed a button and brought the display screen at the front of the room to life. “Well, Mr. President, all forces have been notified to activate Emergency Communications Protocol One. What’s coming up the screen,” he continued as the screen itself flickered while awakening, is the current state and positioning of our communication and spy satellites. Right now our network is 98% intact, though we do expect a steady degradation of—” He stopped as two communication satellites winked out, followed by more flickering from the screen before the signal from the laptop was lost.

Gray scanned the faces around the table as the lights surged this time. “Jeff, maybe it’s time we move down to the EOC. Perhaps that will give us more stability.”

chapter two

Dan Hallberg

ANDREW GRAY WASN'T A particularly nostalgic man, but whenever he made it up to his old stomping grounds in north central Indiana, he always made a point of stopping at Columbo's Family Restaurant in Elkhart to get his favorite pizza.

The style of the pizza was difficult to exactly pin down. The crust was thick, which normally would be a problem but the generous layer of toppings and cheese were such that they balanced well with the breadiness of the crust. The cheese had to be some kind of blend of cheeses, but Andrew had never been able figure out exactly what was in it. The sauce was somewhat thin, but acidic enough to balance the richness of the well caramelized cheese and girthy crust.

Despite numerous attempts to relay these defining traits to the White House chefs, they had yet to succeed in replicating his favorite pie, and as such the last time he had it was during his final term as Governor. Then Governor Gray was scheduled to throw out the first pitch for the newly christened South Bend Cubs, and as South Bend was about half an hour

from Elkhart; he, his wife and daughter stopped for pizza beforehand.

It was April 9th, 2015 and people in the party were beginning to contact him about the potential of running to replace President Obama the next year. It was over those slices of pizza that Lucy told him he should go for it and run. While this ended up being a somewhat momentous conversation, the Governor remembered the details of that day for another reason.

The ceremonial aspects of the day all went generally to plan. The family's modest motorcade arrived at Four Winds Field on time, the Governor threw a serviceable first pitch that wasn't all that straight, but at least didn't bounce. Plus his daughter got her picture taken with the team mascots, Stu and Swoop. It wasn't until the 4th inning when the Governor was informed by his Chief of Staff of a situation. There had been a situation at the Indiana State Assembly and the building was on lockdown. There appeared to be multiple gunmen, and a hostage situation seemed likely.

The Governor jumped into action. Within seconds he was flanked by security, walking as quickly as he could to get briefed on the situation and to figure out what the next steps were. Luckily, what appeared to be multiple gunmen ended up just being one, who was apprehended without incident, but it was Andrew Grey's first taste of dealing with a potentially life threatening crisis, and he knew that it most likely wouldn't be his last.

It was that same rush of purpose and decisiveness that President Gray was feeling now as he walked from the West Wing offices towards the Presidential Emergency Operations Center (PEOC) that was located underneath the East Wing of the White House. His same Chief of Staff from that day was

there again to fill him in on the situation.

“...we informed Vice President Campbell of the situation. He was over at the Eisenhower building when we called, but he should have caught up to us by the time we get down to the PEOC,” Chief of Staff Palmer said as he was skimming a brief handed to him by one of his staffers. Palmer was rarely only doing one thing.

“Thanks Jeff, and I assume we’ll get Lucy and Liz down there shortly as well?”

“Right now that’s a negative sir,” John Cole, the head of President Gray’s Secret Service Detail broke in before the Chief of Staff could speak, “I’m afraid your family was off the grounds this morning and have not returned as of yet.”

“Thanks Cole, keep me apprised of their whereabouts once we know them,” the President commanded.

“Affirmative, sir,” Cole dutifully replied, and the President heard him say something about tracking Bobcat and Bandicoot into his earpiece.

“Sir, we’ve got the National Security Advisor, the Director of the CIA and the Chair of the Joint Chiefs down there waiting for us as well,” Palmer added, and then let out a sigh, “hopefully once we’re down there things will go smoother than last time.”

The only other time this administration had used the PEOC was when President Obama’s staff was running drills for President-Elect Gray’s staff on emergency preparedness. It did not go well. For a room built to be a safe haven in case of emergency, it sure was pretty difficult to access. Aside from a palm print reader at the front door, and two numerical keypads with two separate 6 digit codes at the second and third doors that needed to be inputted within 30 seconds of each other; there were two keys that needed to be turned at the exact same

time in order to open the fourth door, which allowed entry into the PEOC. All in all it took approximately two hours to gain access to that room last time, and now was not a good time for a repeat performance.

President Grey fiddled with one of the two required keys in his pocket as the group descended down five flights of stairs to get to the PEOC.

“Good afternoon Mr. President,” General Williams saluted when he saw his Commander-in-Chief coming down the stairs, and CIA director Evans and National Security Advisor Clarke followed suit.

The President saluted back “at ease gentlemen. Is it afternoon already?”

President Gray checked his phone, and though it no longer had any reception this far down, it did at the very least inform him that it was now 12:10 pm, “Whichever President made this building so damned long ought to have been shot.”

“If I remember my history correctly,” the voice coming from the stairs above was unmistakably that of Vice President Campbell, “Teddy Roosevelt added the West Wing and Truman added the East Wing. So half of the Presidents responsible actually were shot.”

With everyone finally assembled, the group set to getting in the PEOC. While the first door was dispatched rather quickly, getting the timing right on the next two doors took more than one attempt. Additionally, the final door was a bit arduous, as the Vice President seemed incapable of following the President’s rhythm. Though it didn’t take the two hours it took four years ago, it did take at least 20 minutes.

Once inside, the President, Vice President and Chief of Staff occupied one half of the conference table and the Chair of the Joint Chiefs, Director of the CIA and National Security

advisor occupied the other. Agent Cole and his subordinates stood.

Naturally, President Gray was the first to speak, “alright, I have a com satellite down, no one has heard from the ISS in a few hours and I was greeted with Aurora Borealis this morning. General, what have you heard?”

The medals on General William’s jacket jingled as he tugged down on the front of it while he sat up straight, “Mr. President, while we have no confirmation of any hostile acts yet, the EMP blast and the visible phenomenon are most consistent with that of a low-earth orbit nuclear explosion.”

“In 1958,” General Williams opened his laptop and a slideshow of pictures popped up on the large monitor behind him, “we launched Operation Fishbowl. A series of high altitude nuclear tests designed to see the effects of a potential Soviet nuclear attack without hitting the ground. Among the tests was the Starfish test, where a 1.4 megaton nuclear bomb was detonated at an altitude of 250 miles. This resulted in a visible air-glow aurora and a much stronger than anticipated EMP, that knocked out several satellites. Without any other intelligence to go off of, we believe that most likely a similar event is the cause of our situation.”

Vice President Campbell jumped in somewhat flippantly, “so you’re saying someone detonated a nuke above Washington, D.C.? And no one noticed?”

If the General was annoyed with the Vice President’s condescension, he did not show it, “As of right now, it is the only explanation that fits our current set of facts sir.”

“So are we under attack?” Palmer asked without looking up from the notes he was scribbling.

National Security Advisor Clarke answered, “As the General said, we don’t have any hard data on it, but our

experts concur with the military's hypothesis on the low orbit nuclear explosion. The question for us then is who?"

CIA Director Evans jumped in, "of the countries with the capability to pull off such an attack, only Russ-" suddenly the room went black. They had lost power, but the PEOC being a doomsday bunker, was equipped for such an occasion and soon emergency power was humming away."

"Agent Cole," the President spun to face his man, "you have a radio to the agents up in the residence, correct? Can you get to them or do they not have power up there?"

Agent Cole tried to call a few agents above but nobody was answering, "Sorry sir, my last report back was that a car arrived at the North gate at 1307 hours and then my comm went dead."

Cole turned to one of the agents in the room, "Agent Thompson, go up to see what's going on and report ba-" and again the room went dark.

"I thought this thing had emergency power?" Vice President said, with a little more than a hint of apprehension in his voice.

"It does," President Gray replied, "Thompson, why don't you still go up and see what's going on. That is if you can see well enough to get up the stairs"

Though it was pitch black, Agent Thompson was soon able to feel his way around to the door. Everyone heard both the pull, but not the accompanying click that one expects from opening such a heavy door.

"Shit," Palmer exclaimed, "all the locks on those doors are electronic. The freeze for safety in case of a nuclear event."

"Wait? We're stuck here you mean?" the VP's voice had moved from apprehension to nearly an anxiety attack.

"At least until the power comes back on," General Williams

answered in the same tone he used for every response.

“What if it never comes back on?” Campbell’s voice was close to panicked at this point, and the silence he received in response to his questions was not helping ease his concern.

It was then at that very moment that the President heard his stomach growl. With everything going on he had worked through lunch.

The President let out an exasperated sigh, “I would kill for some pizza right now.”

chapter three

B. Morris Allen

AS SOON AS THE lights went, Cole put his back to the PEOC door. He'd been standing in front of it in any case.

“Team Bearclaw, dark on post,” he said into his sleeve mic. “Team, report.”

There was an ominous silence on the earpiece as he wait for the team to report in; not just a lack of answers, but none of the faint background hiss even the clearest radio signal provided.

The emergency lights came on. He could see the nearest agents, one at each end of the hall. “Six, report,” he called out quietly. Six was Hu, a new recruit to the presidential detail, but steady, with a good head on her shoulders, and three years experience in the Service. She was at the far end of the corridor to his left. Nothing down there but storage and electronics. No outside access.

“Clear,” came her low call.

“Condition Red,” he called back. Anything that could take out the power like this was serious. “Five, report.” This was Alvarez, a seasoned agent with several rotations in the

presidential detail. He didn't seem to care for President Gray or his politics, but it wouldn't affect his performance. He and Cole had never discussed it, and never would.

"Clear," came the response, low, assured.

Then the lights went out again. He waited, but they didn't come on again.

"Five, chain report," ordered Cole. "Condition Red." He could hear Alvarez heading quietly up the stairs. Six and Five at either end of this hall, Four on the stairway landing, Three inside and Two outside the door on the ground floor of the White House proper. It would be about a minute to get the full report.

He stepped left, and squatted, in case an intruder planned to rely on memory and dead reckoning to take a shot. They'd have fired long since, but better safe than sorry. He leaned his head back gently, felt the handle of the PEOC door, just where it should be.

It was pitch black in the corridor. It had been about two minutes now. The generators should have come on, or the backup generators. The emergency lighting was battery powered, and shouldn't have gone out at all. None of that had happened. And the radio didn't work. He tried the backup channel, and the second backup, but both were quiet, as expected. He pulled his cell phone from a pocket, held the screen at arms' length, facing away, pressed the power button. No screen glow.

He reached above and behind, to his left, pressed the buzzer on the PEOC door. He'd done it before, once or twice, interrupting whatever discussions they were having in there to report some new development. Well, this was a development, wasn't it? There was no sound from the buzzer, but there never was. The PEOC was hermetically sealed, completely

soundproof. He'd only know they'd heard him if the door opened.

Down the corridor, he heard Five come back down the stairs and creep down the hall. Alvarez' hand on the wall was a tell, but there was a table to avoid, just about ... the steps slowed, then sped up again ... there.

"Dark everywhere," Five reported in a whisper, his sibilants lisped. "Still light topside, of course." It was early afternoon. "No electrics. Two reports fair visibility, natural disturbance." Two was Henderson, a good agent. She was sharp, reliable, careful. A good shot, but sometimes too cautious. A good agent to have on the public-facing side. "Natural light from the lobby," — it was around two corners. Natural disturbance meant human nature — in this case the amount of chaos you might expect from having electricity stop working. "I told her to lock down, Condition Red."

There'd be no one coming in then, without a fight. No one at all. Only Cole or the President himself could countermand that order, and the President was locked in the PEOC. Safe.

"Thoughts?" Cole whispered. What could take out all the active and backup electronics at once, on two floors of the building?

"EMP?" suggested Alvarez. Of course an electro-magnetic pulse was the obvious thought. A power cut would have left the batteries unaffected. The generators were electronic but both simple and air-gapped from the internet; theoretically unhackable.

"Backups are hardened," Cole replied. In theory, anyway. "Pulse train, maybe." They'd had a briefing on this last year. A pulse train was a sequence of EMPs, though he hadn't been quite clear on why that mattered. "Check the generators, report back. Send Six over."

Five made his careful way down the hall toward Six and the electrics. He'd know how to restart the generators, if they worked.

“Sir.” Six, already. She was a quiet one.

“Six. We’ve got no radio, no electrics. Go topside. Find out what’s happening and how widespread it is. If you can, find ...” The VP and Chief of Staff were in the PEOC, as were the National Security Advisor, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and a host of others. Poorly planned, but then no one ever listed to security, did they? Not until it was too late. “Find the Director of the Service if you can, or the Deputy. Commandeer a phone if you find one that works. If you can’t find them, use your judgment. Find out what’s happening.”

“Sir.” He could feel her nod.

“Two won’t let you back in. Give her the password ... ‘Cassandra’. Go now.”

“Sir.” She left as silently as she’d come. She was reliable; she’d do a good job. She was also the least experienced and most expendable of the team. If it came to fight, she’d contribute the least. A good choice for this mission.

At his elbow, he could feel Alvarez lurking, waiting. The lights hadn’t come back, and there was no sound from the generators. That was report enough.

“No go?”

“No, Sir.” As expected.

He spent a moment pondering weapons. They each had a Glock automatic, of course, and a backup. Thank goodness they hadn’t gone to smart guns; those might not work without power. The Glocks had tritium night sights, but those only helped aim the shot; they didn’t illuminate the target. All the agents had pepper spray. Most of the team had knives. Two, Three, and Four had Tazers. There was a locked cabinet down

the hall with Remington shotguns and rifles. With no light, though, those would be too risky to use.

There was only one entrance to this area – the door guarded by Two. Propping that door open wouldn't allow much light – down the stairwell, and then to this hallway – and would be a security risk. They were better off with it closed.

There wasn't much to do, then, but wait, and report to the PEOC. If he could.

“Pass the word to Two. Password ‘Cassandra’ to let Six report back. When she comes back, I'll go up.” If she came back. Who knew what was happening up there? Hadn't someone mentioned sort of natural lighting thing that morning? Northern Lights or something? And there had been some sort of satellite issue.

“Sir.” Alvarez straightened up and moved off.

So, that was the immediate tasks dealt with. Now for the tough one – reporting to the PEOC. He stood up himself, did a few stretching exercises. Not that he was avoiding the topic, of course. But it was a tough one.

The PEOC was locked of course. That was the point. It was a bunker of sorts, protected against everything up to a nuclear blast. The President was safe, that was the main thing. And the PEOC had its own systems. Perhaps they worked.

He felt his way back to the PEOC door, pressed the buzzer. No response, no sense that it was doing anything at all. He went so far as to knock on the door, with his knuckles and with his Streamlight – it wasn't providing any light for his Glock anyway. The sounds died away immediately, and almost certainly hadn't reached anyone inside.

He gave up on knocking and reviewed what he knew about the PEOC. No other way in, no other way to communicate with the inside. Someone hadn't thought this through, hadn't

anticipated a power failure. Even the... His blood chilled. Even the locks were electronic. Could they be opened manually from the inside? He couldn't remember. His job was to be on the outside. Never inside the PEOC. And now he needed to get in.

"Sir," came Five's voice from the side, and Cole turned away from the door. "Cassandra, Sir."

"Right. Take my place. Listen for anything from the PEOC."

"Yes, Sir. And, Sir...."

"What is it?" It was unlike Alvarez to be so hesitant.

"Well, that Northern Lights thing this morning, and the satellite. And my wife said something about the NASA space station."

"The International Space Station?" NASA hadn't had one of its own for decades, he thought.

"Yes. I'm just thinking. Protocol 52? I mean, I know..."

Cole smiled. From anyone else, it would have been a joke. Alvarez didn't have a sense of humor, though. He reached out gently, found an arm, patted it. "We're not there yet, Jandro. Don't worry."

Still, he found his way down the hall to the weapons locker, and felt through it for a couple of shotguns. Protocol 52 was mostly a joke – a would-be protocol for what to do in case of an alien landing. Hostile aliens, but still ones that could be shot. It wasn't different in any real sense from a terrorist lockdown or a hostile force invasion of the capital. Coordinate with the military, keep the principals safe. The same thing they were doing now, pretty much.

Shotguns in hand, he made his way up the stairwell, passing Four on the landing. He handed one shotgun off to Three, inside the topside door.

“Just in case,” he said. “Unlock.”

Three – Agent Kim – slung the shotgun over a shoulder, unlocked the door bolts with one hand, the other on his Glock, and stepped back, free hand now pulling out the pepper spray. Safest in tight quarters.

“Clear, Sir,” he said.

Cole turned the handle slowly, said ‘Cassandra’ in a low voice.

“Clear,” came the response, muffled by the door.

He pushed the door open, stepped out into the light of the hallway. It was bright after the dark of the stairway. Two would be behind the door. Six stood across from him, her gaze pointed down the hall, watching for trouble.

He let the door close behind him, acknowledged Two with a nod, and gave her the other shotgun.

“Six, report.” He gave her a nod to confirm that she could report in front of Two. They all needed to know what they were facing, and the more that heard it from the source, the better.

“Sir, all electronics are down. No cell phones, no computers, no land lines. I couldn’t find the Director or Deputy, though I imagine the Deputy will be here soon.” That was a safe bet. The Director would likely stay put to coordinate a response from all details. But the Deputy might well come to the White House, given the level of people in the PEOC. “Not just electronics. Nothing *electric* either.” It was a good distinction, and one he hadn’t thought to make, though it made no real difference here. No power tools then. No chance of drilling a hole into the PEOC, even if he’d wanted to. Of course, it would have introduced a weakness.

“Cause? Extent? Source? Motive?” Six was more rattled than she seemed, if she hadn’t remembered her base CESM

reporting.

“Yes, Sir.” She had the grace to blush a little at the reminder. “I found a staffer from the National Science Advisor’s office. No known cause. Loss of electronics and electrics appears to apply across all of DC, at least. Earlier this morning, NASA lost contact with the space station, and a satellite failed, so it may be much more extensive. The Science Advisor is working on an EMP theory of some kind. No sign of a nuclear blast, though, so they’re working on other origins. No thoughts on motive, Sir. Though ... well, the President launched his re-election campaign yesterday, of course.”

“Of course.” He’d thought of that, naturally, but taking out all of DC power seemed an extreme response, even in today’s polarized political environment. “Doesn’t seem like the ISS would be a natural target, though.” His mind went back to Protocol 52. Should they be more frightened of aliens? And how would one prepare for that, anyway?

“Good work, Hu.” And now what? “Keep at it. Stay in the White House grounds, but wander freely, try to pick up some actionable info. Report back every hour through Two. Two, you can allow Six back in if she feels it’s necessary. No one else. We’re still Condition Red until I say otherwise.”

“Sir.” “Yes, Sir.” they said, respectively.

Cole took one last look at the dim light of the beige hallway. You never knew when it might be your last. He went back through the door and down the stairs, stopping briefly to chat with each agent and update them on what little he knew. They were good agents all of them, and dedicated. Morale would be important, though, with little to do for the moment but hunker down and wait. For something.

chapter four

Jeanette Everson

The man stood on the street corner and shook his phone again, then cursed quietly and stuffed it back into his pocket.

Across the street, two teenage girls did something similar. Bent over their phones, they pressed buttons, shook the phones, glanced at each other and muttered something no one else could hear. Each bent again, gave their phone a sharp shake, looked up, and shrugged at each other. Simultaneously, they shook their heads and flicked their hair back over their shoulders, before darting out into the deserted street towards Peet's, phones still clasped in manicured hands.

In Peet's, they would be disappointed, as there, the spotty-faced student from the counter had just stepped out into the street, wiped sticky hands on a coffee-smeared apron and was now holding his phone to the sky as if searching for a better signal. He too, sighed, swore, and muttered a frustrated greeting to the girls as he held the door open for them to enter.

“Power's out, whaddya want? Can give you anything you

want so long as it's cold or already made.”

The girls giggled into the gloom of the interior, “Nah, don't worry then,” and left again.

Further back, in the dim innards of the coffee shop, two of the three seated customers pressed buttons on their phones, and struck up the awkward conversation of strangers caught in a situation.

“Yours off too?”

The middle-aged suit nodded assent. A grunt. “Yeah. Must be a cell tower out, with the shortage.” He tried to sound as if he knew what he meant. The twenty-something in the light summer blouse nodded, before scooping up her bag, tossing down some loose change beside her empty coffee cup, and clacking her heels across the short distance to the exit. The third customer did not look up from his newspaper, feigning oblivion to either the problem or the conversation. *Bloody phones*, he thought, determinedly maintaining the pretence of reading a newspaper it was too dark to see clearly now. A wedge of sunlight momentarily highlighted a patch of scuffed linoleum in a vibrant orange. The brightness faded as quick as it had come as the door swung shut again. The lino reverted to its usual shade of dirty footsteps and spilled coffee, and the girl teetered away.

Pennsylvania Avenue was quieter than normal. The twenty-something in the blouse stood, undecided, at the junction. The roads, usually light on traffic at this time of day, were almost entirely free from traffic. She looked up from her unresponsive phone, alerted by the silence. *Light traffic, normal. No traffic, odd. Nice, but odd.* A solitary cyclist freewheeled towards the centre of his lane, a smile stretching across his face as he relished the lack of competition. How pleasant it was to stray away from the curb without fear of delivery vans cutting him off or

tipping him into the gutter. His smile widened and he gave the girl a cheery wave. She didn't wave back. The only other movement in the road was a pair of taxi drivers, now out of their vehicles, and calling bewildered greetings to each other as they closed the short distance between them. Their respective car doors hung open, and the girl realised that there was not one single moving car within either eyesight or earshot. *Weird*. Usually when the power went down, the district would echo with the cry of alarms, sounding off in fury in response to their interrupted connection. Now, though, there was nothing. *Definitely weird*. A prickle raised the hairs on her arms, despite the heat of the sun. The only sounds were the gentle clink of a flag's rope against its pole, moving softly in the faintest of breezes; the barely audible hiss of the bicycle tyres on asphalt as the cyclist pedalled on, and the two men's voices carrying clear across to her from the opposite carriageway. She looked at her phone once more, then strode determinedly towards the taxi drivers. The clock on the building behind them showed seven minutes past one, although she felt it must be a good ten after than that. It had, she knew, been exactly 1.05pm when she had rejected the call from her office in favour of the barista slopping her latte down in front of her, just moments before the power went out.

Further out, in a tower block in the residential district to the southeast of the city, neighbours stepped out of their homes and took faltering steps up to front doors of people they would only occasionally wave at. In unavoidable situations, such as inconveniently arriving at their doors at the same time, or waiting for the lift together, they may mumble "how're you?" without looking up, but generally, social interactions were rare around here. The old man at number 23b crossed

the landing in 2 strides to rap tentatively on the door of number 25, but even as he raised his fist, the door swung open. Both spoke at once, and although neither listened, their answers were the same, “It’s not just the electric; my phone’s off too. Nothing works.” Shrugging, they made the unspoken decision to turn towards the lifts, then as one, they chuckled self-consciously, swung around, and made for the stairs instead.

Outside, other neighbours had gathered in the tarmacked stretch— the building details called it ‘car parking’ but in reality it held no more than two cars up on blocks; a half-filled skip, and some clumps of parched grass poking through the cracks— an impromptu street party in the sun, without food or bunting.

They stood, mingling, almost neighbourly: “spect it’ll be back on in a minute.” “Lovely weather.” “You lived here long, have you?” (*Eighteen bloody years*, he thought to himself.) “I’ve some lemonade in the fridge, who wants some?”

It wasn’t a sound that caused them to stop the small talk and look up— perhaps a slight shift in the air, or a glimpse of the unusual in someone’s peripheral vision, but after a sudden exclamation— no one could say who from, after— one by one, the little group turned to the east and watched in horror in mutual understanding that a plane’s descent should not be silent. Usually— everyone knew but no one said— the noise from the jet engines would tear through the air and rattle the crockery on their tables as planes made their descent over their building, flying onwards towards Regan airport on the far side of the river. Being directly under the flightpath was what made this area a hair’s breadth more affordable, and although each one of them was fully aware of the air traffic noise, it had become so normal they almost forgot it.

“It’ll clear us,” one man volunteered— an offering of hope to drop into the stunned group. They followed the silently-gliding aeroplane, craning necks as it passed overhead, until they lost sight of it beyond other buildings. A collective exhale rippled through them, although it was some moments before the silence was broken by speech.

“Maybe he’ll be able to bring it in safely, with it being so low? It’ll get to the airfield, at least, so they’ll be ready for it,” someone finally suggested, but without real conviction.

Back towards the capitol, and with the sun a few fractions lower in the sky, the clock on the Old Post Office Pavilion also showed a static and silent 13.07, but the streets had become busier.

Up in the clock tower, a tourist couple looked down onto a steady pattern of antlike creatures closing in towards the government buildings, or the mayor’s office, or somewhere around that area. Honeymooners, first time in the capital, they didn’t know which building was which, couldn’t make head nor tail of the shitty little tourist map the daft cow on reception had insisted they take. Didn’t even know which way they were facing, truth be told. They’d already been up here a while, an hour or two, probably, but had spent the majority of that time making out, turned on by the dizzying heights, or thoughts of being discovered, or by being the only visitors up here this lunchtime, who knows what excuse they needed— They are young and in love, aren’t they? It was only now, that they had finally drawn apart from each other, slightly breathless, patting down and straightening each other’s clothes, giggling like school kids that they agreed they might as well see the view, now that they had, er, seen the view...

From the ground, people saw the honeymooners’ antlike

army as what they really were: armed police, hurrying in twos and threes, occasionally a foursome, a six, or at one intersection of main streets, even a cluster of nine, as they drew nearer to their destination. It was not an easy progress, as by now, pedestrians, shop keepers, bar tenders, and office workers had spilled onto the streets. For every step the officers took forward, their passage was aborted by an arm on their sleeve, a person in their path, questions that began as curious, light-hearted even – “What’s going on?” “Has something happened?” but grew to higher panic the further on the clocks would have ticked if only they had been ticking at all.

Police officers, trying to remain calm, also became increasingly short with the enquirers.

“Probably just an outage, be back on before you know it.”

“It’s fine, madam, don’t worry, we’re dealing with it.”

“We don’t know, we’re going to find out.”

“Stay in your buildings.”

“Go back inside.”

“We are trying to find out, but we have lost communication. We don’t know.”

“Yes, we are going to the bloody White House, someone there will know what’s going on, now get out of the bloody way, *Madam*.”

As the words became less reassuring, their patience ebbing and their panic rising, so too did the tone of their answers. Professional training could not stop the slight rise to their voices, or the tremor in their words, and by the time the sun was dipping into an orange sky and plummeting towards the river, some had even inadvertently shoved the odd passer-by quite roughly, in response to yet another question that could not yet be answered.

The eerie silence was broken occasionally, by what people would describe wonderingly as fireworks, explosions, bombs, or planes, unless they were those unfortunate enough to have witnessed the exact cause— these people had far greater cause for panic, for they knew for sure that the noise, the flash of fire, plume of smoke, whatever, was indeed from a plane landing awkwardly on the edges of the runway, bouncing twice, then bursting into a fireball, or another that had landed in a still more catastrophic condition, next to a school 20 miles from the airport.

Other, more localised noises rose from the clamouring, hammering, and rising voices from the unfortunate few trapped in an increasingly airless subway train, or from those running, rushing, pushing, as they clambered over each other in their haste to get up from the underground entrapment of the stations, or the subway carriage from which a pair of office workers had managed to prise an exit by pulling apart the doors with more brute force than they knew they possessed.

Without discussion or logical planning, many of the city's workforce gave up waiting for a restoration of power at what they judged to be a reasonable amount of time, and left their workplace. Reasonable time, of course, varied, according to dedication to the work – government officials, lawyers, waited longer, for example, than the student waiters in the Hard Rock Café, or the underpaid cashiers in the newsagents or convenience stores, but in most workplaces the grumbling about a long walk home on a hot summer's day was almost universal.

Anyone who paid even a cursory idea of the patterns of the sun in August would have guessed that it was roughly 6pm before the first looting began. With hindsight, the gaggle of teenagers from a rougher area in the southernmost tip of DC

would wish that they had raided a food store. Unfortunately, in the excitement of the moment and the knowledge that they would not get caught (“No CCTV, right,” they laughed, nudging each other) they eschewed the food stores and went for what they short-sightedly thought would be the valuables. With all that happened afterwards, throwing a half-brick through the un-alarmed window of the electrical goods store and grabbing the biggest TV they could each carry, and a couple of laptops balanced precariously atop for good measure, hardly seemed sensible. As the sun set further, the liquor stores were the next to fall victim to those who were yet to understand that this may not be *just a temporary blip in the power supply of the city*, as one solitary police officer had been overheard saying.

Officer Bradshaw had in fact said this to a bewildered old lady whom he had discovered standing at a road junction, too afraid to cross because the traffic lights were out.

“You never do know when one of those juggernauts might come around the corner, or a young hooligan on a motorbike,” the poor dear had dithered to the policeman, as she moved her laden carrier to her other arm and jostled her walking stick menacingly toward the imagined offenders. Still confident in the imminent restoration of power, Officer Bradshaw had simply offered his arm and customary patience and escorted her across. He refrained from asking her if she had noticed that not a single vehicle had moved in the neighbourhood for several hours, and noted what a wonderful day it was, with the sun so warm. In gratitude, she had offered him a cookie from the already opened package in her plastic carrier, which he accepted gratefully, wishing aloud for a cup of tea to quench his increasing thirst.

The old lady chuckled softly as she caught herself midway

through offering, “Oh no, I am losing my marbles, Officer, there’ll be no way to boil the kettle... in my day we’d have had them old gas stoves and I’ve have whipped you up a cuppa without a bother but my son has it stashed away in the attic and my old bones aren’t what they used to be and I ain’t climbing up there after it, an’ I’d be askin’ you to pop up there an’ fetch it down, but what’s to say it won’t all be fixed and up and running back to normal just as soon as you have it done an’ I bet that dear Tom has it just about fixed already... would you believe I knew that lad when he was just a wee boy, and now he’s our mayor, god bless his mother, she’d be so proud —”

The policeman, having escorted her safely to her front door, cut her off. He did this not by voicing his query as to how Thomas Owen could fix a power cut that was clearly a larger fault than usual to have taken the phones out with it. He also didn’t voice the thought that followed that one— whether the President was in fact the one on the case seeing as it must be major, or still holed up in a hotel somewhere in Indy... *he should’ve paid more attention, was the bloke home yesterday, or still off and away campaigning? Dammit it’s this lack of attention that don’t get me promoted and has me still helping old ladies over the street...*

What he said aloud was “Have you some candles, love?” as he mentally ransacked his own kitchen drawers wondering if he should find some from somewhere on his way home or if they already had some; *better call the missus*. He was halfway to his pocket before he remembered the phones were down, but retrieved his mobile to check it anyway. Still off. Luckily, the heat was going from the day, and his shift would be over soon... *sunset at about twenty to eight, this time of year, so I’ll know well enough when the day is over...* after an 8-8 twelve-hour shift, he’d be ready for some cold beer on the porch. His mind

wandered again, as he imagined himself in a rocker in the quiet summer evening, enjoying the darkness for a change. It wasn't often they got to watch the stars, here in the suburbs of the city. *Maybe it would turn romantic... must be ages since the last time they'd got amorous, what with being married 26 years or so...*

The old lady interrupted his meanderings once more, and he realised she'd been wittering on about something for the past few minutes, *no idea what...* She patted him on the arm, and stood on the stoop to wave him off, before turning into the house in search of the candles she'd assured him she kept handy for "Just such purposes Officer Bradshaw, don't you worry about me, sure wasn't I born in wartime, I can just about live through anything I should think."

As he walked away, he automatically reached for his radio, but for the umpteenth time since being directed out to patrol the area shortly after the power cut, he made no contact with his station. The nagging feeling that not only were the phones and the city's power crippled, but also that it couldn't be coincidence that the radios also wouldn't function, and that cars were abandoned where they'd stopped, threatened to come back into the forefront of his mind. He shook his head and forced his thoughts back to his wife, the porch, the beer... Stretching out his back, and flexing his neck, he turned towards the station.

"If I walk steady, I'll be there in time to check out for the day," he said to a scrawny cat mewling from a patch of dry grass. "A quick handover and a brisk hour's walk if the car still won't start, should be home before full dark." The cat turned its back, disinterested. "Don't envy the night shift, what with all the lights out everywhere. I guess it mightn't be fixed till morning now." He bent to pet it, but it slinked away into the long dark shadows thrown by a pair of overflowing rubbish

bins.

chapter five

Terence MacManus

ROBERTA MIGUEL DIDN'T NOTICE the crisp-suited agent standing by her door until he cleared his throat with a distinct cadence that suggested this was the third or fourth time he had done so.

She looked up from the mess of handwritten memos that had flooded across her desk since the phones had gone down and stepped back as another representative's adjunct apologetically slinked through the door and dropped yet one more notice atop the pile. Even without turning her eyes from the agent, she could see the over-large capitalised scrawl on the note in her peripheral vision.

She crossed her arms and pinched the bridge of her nose until the adjunct had backed out of the office, stepping around the man politely waiting by the door.

"It's that bad, is it?" she asked.

"Madame Speaker?"

"Was it an attack? Who did we lose—Andrew? William?" There were a range of reasons why a federal agent might turn up at her door, but in light of what had been happening that

afternoon she could only think of one explanation for that agent being from the Secret Service; and although she couldn't help noticing the man at her doorway was missing the traditional earpiece of his profession, the suit, shades, and lapel pin more than confirmed him as such.

The agent pursed his lips and stepped inside her office, shifting a large black duffel bag in with him as he did so. Roberta felt the hairs on her arms prickle as her eyes flicked towards it, but she said nothing as the agent closed the door before replying. "We've been out of contact with both the President and the Vice President since the incident, Madame Speaker."

Roberta took a weak step sideways and lowered herself into her chair. She pressed a fist to her mouth in a vain attempt to mask her shaking.

"They're both dead?" she asked when she'd regained a measure of composure.

"We're not sure, Madame Speaker. The President was in council in the PEOC when the principal event occurred, and we haven't been able to contact them since. There's every chance they're all fine in there—better than average, certainly—but we can't know for certain."

"Hence, you've come for me."

The agent nodded.

"The House is meant to be sitting in less than an hour," Roberta stated with a gesture to the chaos strewn across her desk. The agent must surely have seen the queue of messengers and irate Representatives who hadn't the patience to write and had stormed into her offices themselves. "I can't exactly walk out and leave all this behind, not without any way to keep in contact."

"I'm sorry, Madam Speaker, but I must insist," the agent

stated simply. The impassive face visible around his reflective glasses brooked no argument. Roberta would never have got where she was if she'd allowed herself to be swayed by the stubbornness of the men around her, but she had also learned where and when to pick her battles. As the acting President of the United States of America, her responsibilities lay elsewhere, now, and she knew it.

“All right, then,” she replied. She stood, and although her legs still felt like jelly at first, she found they gained strength with each step she took towards the door. She opened it and called for her harried assistant.

“I need you to go find Representative Bensen; tell him I am officially delegating the House to him *pro tempore*. Be as nice as you can about it, and try to duck whatever he throws at you for landing him in the middle of this garbage fire.” Roberta turned back to the agent standing beside her.

“I’m all yours,” she said. She crossed back over to her desk to retrieve her bag and her essentials. It’s funny, she thought as she packed the dead weight of her phone inside, how she had lived nearly thirty years of her life without it yet felt its loss so keenly now.

She heard the sound of a zipper pulling behind her and turned to see her agent pulling a flak vest out of the duffel bag he’d carried in with him.

“Really?” she asked with an arched eyebrow. “Do you think some Oswald will be perched at a window covering the incredible distance between the front door and your car?”

The agent shook his head. “I’m afraid the car’s a no-go, Madam Speaker. We’ll be taking the Capitol Subway as close as we can, then we’ll have to close the remainder above-ground.”

Roberta winced as she accepted the bulky jacket from the agent’s outstretched hand. She looked down at her dress shoes.

“I don’t suppose the subway monorail is running, either?”

“Sorry, Madam Speaker.”

She sighed. “I guess I’d better get used to walking.”

“No. Absolutely not. It’s utterly out of the question.”

Karl Bailey, the Whitehouse Press Secretary, looked worse than Roberta felt after her silent and tense shuffle through the Capitol’s underground tunnels. The agent who had come to collect her—along with the small army of other Secret Service members who’d melted out of the crowds at the House offices to join them as they wove their way to the tunnels and beyond—had kept their pace brisk and Roberta could already feel muscles she’d forgotten she had promising terrible revenge come tomorrow.

Karl, on the other hand, seemed to have racked up even more miles than her just pacing in circles around the office. Roberta should probably have been unsurprised to find herself shuttled into the oval room, but sitting here, behind the desk, felt utterly surreal.

“I don’t recall asking for your permission, Karl. I asked how we can make it happen,” she clarified. Karl fidgeted with the grubby knot of his tie, darkly patterned from his nervous sweat.

“We don’t even know what’s going on inside that bunker,” he insisted as he lurched from one side of the room to the other. “Think about what we’re saying to the American people if we address them before we even know how long the President will be trapped in there! It’ll cause a panic! Think of the optics; we’ll be all but admitting that the President and the entire executive have been wiped out!”

“All the more reason I need to get in front of the situation before it gets in front of us, Karl. We need to get out there

and reassure the public.” She looked at the haggard jumble of bureaucrats gathered in the office; men and women who never expected, at the start of the day, to be making decisions for the nation. All except one—the director of the secret service. He remained cool and unflappable in the face of the crisis, perfectly in his element.

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible, Madam Speaker,” he said. “As the next in the line of succession, I must insist you remain here until we can determine the likelihood of further attacks on the executive branch.”

“We don’t even know for sure that this *was* an attack—you’re telling me this could have been a, what did you call it? A solar flare?”

The scientist she had turned to address shrugged helplessly. “It *could* have been. Or it could have been an EMP. Or it could have been the Earth’s magnetic poles shifting—the problem is, all the instruments that were recording at the time of the event are completely useless now; it’ll take time to piece the data back together with retroactive analysis.”

“Okay. Well, give me some facts I can use now. Where are we with the PEOC? Can anyone get me an estimate of when we’ll have the doors open?”

“It’s hard to say, Madam Speaker,” one of the acting executive—Roberta couldn’t remember their name—volunteered, glancing down at their handwritten notes. “We have teams working on rotation with hammers and... hand drills, if you can believe it.” They shuffled some papers around. “Apparently someone knew somebody who’s hobby is traditional boatbuilding out of their basement. But the door’s been made to withstand anything up to a nuclear attack—we’re trying to break through 21st Century technology with 19th Century tools.”

Roberta chewed the inside of her lip as she tapped a pencil against the pad in front of her. “Surely we’ve got a generator or two sitting around somewhere that we can hook up to the doors and jump-start the electronic locks? Or that we can hook up to a proper drill, if it comes to that?”

Another woman shook her head as she answered. “Every single generator we’ve tried simply won’t turn on. We sent some Federal agents looking for a steam boiler at the museums, but Lord knows if or when they’ll find one, when it will get there, and if we can even retrofit a working turbine or drill onto it once it does.”

Roberta sighed and tossed the pencil on to the desk. “So we have no idea when the door will be open. Great. What about defence? Do we have anything on the scope of this attack?”

A man in a military uniform cleared his throat. “We don’t, uh... we’re not sure, Madam Speaker. Our lines of communication have been completely cut; we’ve sent riders out of the city on horseback but we haven’t heard back from them yet. We have no way of knowing if this thing is local, national or—God forbid—global. We could be under attack right now, anywhere in the country, and not know about it.”

A disquieted buzz passed through the office.

“Haven’t you got systems in place for an attack like this?” Roberta asked. “Something like, I don’t know—a morse code network or, or carrier pigeons?”

The soldier shook his head. “Morse code still needs electricity to run; even the early field units had a hand crank. And no, we’ve checked; they’re not working, either. And we haven’t used pigeons in over fifty years. Honestly, I wouldn’t even know where to begin with those. A man and a horse, though—that still works. And maybe I’m just a simple boy

who grew up watching too many Westerns, ma'am, but there ain't nothing in America that fills me with more confidence than a man on his horse."

Roberta sighed, then pushed back her chair and stood.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm hearing a lot of problems without solutions at the moment and I know I can't be the only one who is frankly shocked at our inability to respond. If we let this situation continue unchecked and unmanaged I don't envy the city, or the country, we'll be handing back to the executive once they're out of that bunker—if they're coming out at all." She straightened her back and set her shoulders. "Someone needs to tell the people that everything is going to be okay. Right now, Karl, that should be you and me—but you're right," she said, heading off both Karl and the Director of the Secret Service before they could raise their objections, "I can't do that as acting President. It would send the wrong message, and I would be unnecessarily painting myself as a target to any enemy actors. But if I go out there as the Speaker of the House, as the representative of the very people I'm addressing and focusing on the truths we know—that the executive are in a safe location which our enemies presently cannot reach—then we can do some good. *I* can do some good. You don't need me to sit in here and wring my hands while each of your departments are handling this crisis. It's right there in my title, Karl; I'm a *speaker*. I'm going to speak." She shot her best glare at the Director of the Secret Service, honed by her decades in the political arena. She knew how and where to pick her battles, and *this* was one she was going to win. "I'll even wear that damn jacket again if you like."

The director pursed his lips, but didn't argue the matter further. She saw the focus in his eyes blur as he retreated into his thoughts, doubtlessly considering where the line between

their positions should be drawn.

The Press Secretary laughed in the sudden silence, bordering on the manic. “And just how are we supposed to do that, Madam Speaker? Shall I call for a press conference on the steps out front—oh, no, the phones aren’t working. And neither are the microphones, or video cameras, or radios, or television sets. Are the printing presses working? Who knows!”

“We need to do *something*,” Roberta insisted. “Even if we only start local and let the news fan out from here. There’s got to be some way we can...” her thought trailed off as something from the last few minutes of conversation wormed its way to the back of her mind and triggered a memory there. She smiled, finally feeling like there was something she could control. “You know, I remember taking a scenic carriage ride around the Capitol with my hus—with my *ex-husband*, some years ago. It was a lovely little jinker, with bells and ribbons and a nice wide platform in the centre. I bet we could requisition a pair somewhere for Karl and me.”

“You expect me to let you put yourself in harm’s way... so you can go on a *carriage ride*?” the director of the Secret Service asked incredulously.

“That’s right,” Roberta said, “a carriage ride that will keep me moving around the city, keep me off street level and separate me from the crowds while letting me move through them. It’ll even give you a discrete area your agents can surround, one which can be easily passed off to another speaker once something changes back here and you *do* actually need me in this chair—or if you can think up a better way to get me around.” She caught the eye of the agent that had escorted her here and finished with a smile.

“After all, what we need now more than anything is to remind the people of our American spirit—our strength, our

community, our resilience and our ingenuity. And what says that better than an old west town crier on her horse?”

The agent didn't return her smile, but she thought she detected a hint of sardonic humour as he replied, “it sure beats walking.”

chapter six

Dawn Oshima

IT WAS AN EARLY September morning, birds singing happy songs in the distance and a cool breeze sweeping through the copse of trees near the municipal park. Captain Joe McLean leaned back in the driver seat of the police cruiser and closed his eyes, savoring the coolness coming through his open car window and dreading the stifling heat to come. It was going to be a challenging day all around and he needed to be awake and alert for the sake of everyone who was coming later in the day.

“Hey Pops, what’s up?”

Thunk! McLean woke with a groan, muzzy and bleary-eyed from his stolen nap. Outside there was a blurry form walking around his car; McLean reached around for his wire rims sitting on the dashboard and put them on. Just as he blinked the world into focus a sliver of sun broke over the horizon and blinded him.

“Hey Pops are you all...”

Thunk! The car jolted to one side as something crashed into his car and McLean blinked tears out of his eyes as he struggled to get out of his car. He fell but quickly rolled over

to a crouching position when something crashed into the car again. Cursing under his breath, he pulled out his gun, mentally counted to three, then stood and aimed his gun at the troublemakers.

“Stop what you’re doing, police! I’ve got a gun and I will shoot if you don’t stop at once!”

The two men slowly turned around. The tall one had the shorter man in a modified choke hold while the other was struggling to get out of it. McLean relaxed when he saw that the tall man was wearing a DC police uniform and holstered his gun..

“Oh it’s you Captain McLean. Sorry for not saluting you, sir, but I have my hands full at the moment. I noticed this perp sneaking around your car while you were sleeping so I hid behind that tree to see what he was going to do. When you pulled up your hands I knew that something was up so I rushed over here and got him under control just in case you were in danger.”

“And you are?”

“Vince Cabot, sir, MPD.”

McLean pursed his lips as he looked at the struggling man and sighed. “All right, enough. Stand down. Let him go. I know this idiot and he’s no threat to national security. A pain in my ass but nothing more serious than that.”

The big arms slowly released their hold and the shorter man stumbled over to a tree, coughing his lungs out. McLean shook his head as another officer ran up to the car with a worried look on her face. She looked first at the sheepish rookie then at the captain, standing at attention and giving a smart salute.

“Hello, sir. I hope everything is all right here.”

“And you are?”

“Sir, my name is Victoria Long, Officer First Class, sir.”

“Officer, am I keeping you from your duties?”

She shook her head. “Vince, he’s my partner, and I were assigned here to help the mayor distribute food and supplies to the public. Actually I think we might be a little late for the morning meeting. Vince, can you go on ahead and tell them I’ll be a little late. I need to talk to the captain about some scheduling issues, okay?”

He nodded and turned to the captain. “I’m sorry for the disturbance, sir. Please accept my apologies.”

“No problem. You did what you thought was right but you were lucky this time. Wait for backup next time, all right.”

“Yes, sir.”

“All right, you’re dismissed.”

The rookie saluted at attention then turned to job towards the far end of the park where the main tent was set up. Long turned back to the captain and sighed. “Sir, I’m sorry for my partner...”

“Man, that boy has a grip on him. Good thing he works for us.”

The shorter man wandered over to where McLean and Long were standing and leaned against the car, gingerly massaging his neck and wincing when he hit a sore spot. “Remind me next time to bring along a white flag and maybe a peace pipe for good measure.”

McLean sighed again as he took off his glasses to inspect for any smudges or scratches. “Laugh all you want but you’re going to get yourself shot one day, Tully. Especially now.”

“Yeah, I know but remember, I’m the cat with nine lives.”

“You better be careful, son. I’m a pussycat compared to your mother. That tiger’s gonna rip you a new one if you’re not careful.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

It was Tully’s turn to sigh. Brushing through his shaggy brown hair with one hand he turned to Long who was still standing at attention, trying hard not to listen. “Tell your partner he did the right thing, for what it’s worth. Still, ouch.”

Long gave a quick nod as she looked straight ahead. McLean looked around as more people were walking up the path. Some were looking their way, curious and questioning, but most were focused on the big tent ahead. Young and old, fathers pushing baby carriages while mothers held their babies, even whole families were trudging up the dirt road to join the line of people standing behind the police barrier at the entrance to the park proper.

“You better go join your partner at the tent, Officer Long. Looks like it’s gonna be a busy day from the look of things. Dismissed.”

Long saluted the captain before running off toward the tent beyond. Tully shook his head and stood beside the captain who was still studying the people waiting in line.

“It’s only been like a week and there’s this many people wanting supplies? What’s up with that?”

“The power outage caught everyone by surprise so no one was really ready. Food spoils and all people want is toilet paper, go figure. You’d think...but there it is. What I’m more worried about is what happens if the power doesn’t come back on.”

Tully nodded. “Yeah, that’s what my editor keeps telling me. Civil unrest, riots in the streets...she’s just a ray of sunshine, ain’t she?”

“Just watch yourself, Tully. Your mama is gonna kick your ass if you get caught up with all your reporting and get yourself killed.”

“Okay, Dad, I heard you. And you better be careful too.

You know what they say, guns don't kill people, people kill people..."

"Just shut up, son."

Tully nodded once and they both stood, shoulder to shoulder, as they watched every person walk on by.

"Aren't you glad I saw you standing by your car, waving your arms like one of your rabid supporters at your rallies?"

Roberta Miguel rolled her eyes as she looked over at her supposed rescuer. Mayor Thomas Owen was not her idea of a knight in shining armor. More like rusty mail riding a broke down nag, she thought to herself, and tried to stifle a chuckle at the thought.

Owen stole a glance at her then laughed. "Oh ho, so you do have a sense of humor. Good for you. So, where are you going?"

"None of your business."

"Hmph, short and to the point. I like that..."

"In a woman, you mean."

Owen laughed again. "I mean, in a politician. Blowhards, every single one of them."

"Well, thank you very much. I think."

"You know, we could make a good team, you and I."

"How's that?"

"I mean, you represent the Hispanic vote in your district while I am Mayor in my district..."

"What's that got to do with the crisis we're in?"

"Oh, nothing. Just passing the time."

They continued in silence as buildings and stores made way for little shops and trees. It had been a while since Roberta communed with nature of any sort. Maybe it was time she took a break from her busy political life and talked to some

trees. Maybe after this was all over...

“And here we are.”

“And where is here exactly?”

Owen pulled into a small parking lot which was not much more than a dirt lot and parked in one of the few spaces left. “Looks like there’s a lot of folks already here. I told the folks here that I’d help distribute food and other supplies to those in need. Gotta help the community, you know.”

Roberta stopped herself from rolling her eyes again. “You never stop being the politician, don’t you? Why don’t you just help for the sake of helping.”

Owen laughed again as he checked his hair in the rear view mirror. “Gotta do what I can. That’s why they elected me mayor.” He checked his teeth, cocking his head side to side for a final check, before clicking his tongue and rolling out of the car.

“Are you coming?”

Roberta sighed as she unbuckled her seat belt and prepared herself for the show ahead.

chapter seven

Nick Calvert

ROBERTA MIGUEL WAS SITTING behind her desk, shuffling through her notes from yesterday's meeting, when a besuited Karl arrived with coffee.

"You're a Godsend, friend," she said, grinning, taking the mug with a monkey stenciled on it and inhaling the rich aroma from the brew.

"I know, I know," Karl said, sitting in the visitors chair. "You say the same thing every morning, when I bring coffee... I'm not so popular when I don't."

"Not surprising. When you arrive sans coffee it generally means there's some disaster brewing that needs instant mitigation."

"Not today, Roberta. At least nothing I've heard of."

"Good!" Roberta took a sip and sighed. "Whatever happens, we need to keep Huego happy. If the district loses him, there goes the world's greatest barista."

"The world's only barista." Karl said.

"Hmm." Roberta put her mug down, tapped her notes into shape and put them to one side. "So, what's on the agenda for

today, Karl?”

Karl made a show of pulling out his notebook and thumbing through it. “Well... We start with your daily walk through the Mall and the Arboretum.”

“Ah. So the same as yesterday, then?”

“Mmm hmm. And the day before, and....”

“So, what’s with the notebook and suit?”

Karl took a sip from his mug, then pursed his lips. “Way back when, way back before, there was a program on PBS called ‘Keeping Up Appearances.’ I don’t know if you ever saw it?”

Fascinated, Roberta shook her head. Occasionally they broke the norm by telling each other little personal details. It was a way of deepening their relationship, which, over the past fourteen months, had gone from initial vituperous politicking to a deep friendship. She almost couldn’t believe he was the same White House press secretary who had come close to destroying her career. Almost.

“‘Keeping Up Appearances’ was a British comedy that my wife and I loved. The kids were still young enough to be in bed by the time it came on, and on the odd occasion I wasn’t stuck in the West Wing and made it home, we’d have a take-away and kick back and laugh until we cried.

“The point is the title. ‘Keeping Up Appearances.’ What’s happened is all so nutso I could see myself joining the idiots that wear costumes from the museums. So last night we came to the decision to try and get back to what was once normality. Thus, the suit.”

“Riiiiight.” Roberta said, conscious she was wearing a pair of George Washington’s worsted pantaloons, along with one of his waistcoats over an Angora sweater. She didn’t think Karl had meant anything personal with his ‘idiots’ comment,

but what the hell! It was Autumn, and she'd far prefer to be warm than freezing on her daily rounds.

Half an hour later Roberta and Karl were standing in the food court at the centre of the mall, watching the families that inhabited the McDonalds and the I-Hop doing the communities washing in what had, until the apocalypse, been a large pool with a fountain. Luckily, its water supply had been drawn from an artesian well and engineers had somehow managed to convert the pump to Donkey power.

“Do you need anything, Administrator?” Bess Brooks, the head of the washers, asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Not today, thank you Bess. Everything alright with you and the families? No problem with supplies?”

“We're fine, thank you for asking. Though... I heard a rumour from one of my boys who works in the Arboretum.

“Oh yes?” Karl said.

“Yeah,” Bess said. “Remember in the old days when there were activists, and union troubles?”

“I do,” Roberta said. “It wasn't that long ago.”

“No, it wasn't, though it seems like another lifetime....”

“Well, Brian tells me, there's a man who is spreading descent among the planters and horsemen. He's telling them supplies are plentiful and there's no need to work. Brian says he's gathering a small group of people around him. I thought you ought to know, Administrator.”

“Thank you Bess. I much appreciate it.” Roberta said, watching Bess as she walked over to pat the two working donkeys before going back to chivy the families along.

“She's good folk.” Karl said.

“She is. Most of them are. It's just the odd rotten apple.

“Come on, Karl. We'd best get to the Arboretum and nip

whatever trouble is brewing, in the bud.” She chuckled.

Karl groaned. “Mixed metaphors? Really? It’s a pity it’s autumn. Not that many buds to nip.”

“Even one could be problematic,” Roberta said.

“We ain’t lifting a fucking finger,” John Dengue said, sneering at Roberta. “And I don’t think there’s a lot you can do about it!”

“Oh, I think you’ll find there’s quite a lot I can do, if I choose, Mr. Dengue.” Roberta said. She was flanked by Karl on her left and two of the best militiamen Karl had managed to find on their way from the mall to the arboretum.

Dengue was flanked, too. He had six planters behind him, along with two horsemen holding onto their horse’s bridles. Roberta thought four of them looked embarrassed, and smiled inwardly. Maybe this wouldn’t be so hard.

“You do realise that our future relies upon cooperation. If we don’t work together, the world, even as it is now, will not survive for future generations. I....”

“Think I give a fuck?” Dengue interrupted, his hand now resting on his holster. “There’s enough food in the warehouses to last forever. Why should we work our fingers to the bone, planting, and weeding, and hoeing, and sowing? Why don’t you come and do a bit of graft rather than sitting on your fat arse in your cozy little office, eh? Madam Speaker?”

The four who had looked embarrassed turned and walked away.

“Oi! Where do you think you’re going?” Dengue said, visibly shaking with anger. One of the three planters stopped and turned around.

“She’s right, John. This isn’t the me me me world it once was, my friend. If we don’t work together to rebuild, then

what's the point?"

"Turncoat!"

"If you say so, John. If you say so." He turned to Roberta. "Apologies, Administrator. John can be quite persuasive when he chooses. We'll be back to work now. Goodbye."

Roberta was about to speak when the rest of Dengue's coterie turned away and followed the first four. She watched them go, and almost allowed herself a smile.

The sound of the two militiamen ratcheting rounds into their guns startled her. She turned back to Dengue, who had half drawn his sidearm, and took a calming breath.

"Work with the others, Mr. Dengue. Work and draw your rations as we all do... Or don't work and your rations will be withheld. It's your choice. Good day to you." Roberta, Karl, and the guards turned to leave.

"Bitch!" Dengue said, almost too quietly for Roberta to hear. As they walked towards the arboretum's exit she saw Karl give her a thumbs-up, and allowed herself a satisfied grin.

"...and that's the problem with the 2nd amendment, especially now." Karl said, thumping Roberta's desk with his hand. "Well? Any response?"

"Karl, this is the most pointless, circular argument. And it's not that we don't have it on a regular basis. I'm just not in the mood right now."

"But Dengue was about to shoot you! If we hadn't had the two militiamen with us, he would..."

"But we did! And he didn't! Leave it Karl. Dengue must have gone back to work. We'd have heard by now if he hadn't."

"Yes, Administrator." Karl said.

"Do not fling a moody on me, Karl. I've enough on my

plate without that.”

“Sorry Roberta.”

There was a peremptory knock on the door.

“Are we expecting anyone?”

“No,” Karl said. “Nothing scheduled until afternoon.” The knock repeated, louder and more urgent.

“Come in!” Roberta said.

The Captain of the Militiamen pushed open the door and strode into the room, snapping to attention in front of Roberta’s desk. He saluted, then stood at ease.

“Good morning Captain Fender, and how may I be of help?”

“Madam Speaker, we...”

“Please, Captain. If it’s anything it’s Administrator and that’s debatable. What I once was was finished the moment the apocalypse struck. The world is now a very different place.”

“Apologies Ma... Administrator, M’am.” Fender said. “We caught a thief in warehouse three. He’d been in warehouses one and two as well, but got away undetected. He was pushing a handcart loaded with food and other supplies. By the quartermaster’s rough reckoning he had enough for several years.”

“Several years?” Karl said.

“Two or three, the quartermaster thinks. Though that entirely depends on the number of people. There was no fresh produce.”

“Ah... and his name?” Roberta said, with a sinking feeling.

“Dengue, M’am. John Dengue. We have him in the lockup.”

After the results of the straw poll had been accepted, Roberta and Karl took the last remaining carriage across the district to

the Militamen's home. Painted in pastel colours with a large trompe l'oeil garden, it was as cheery a set of buildings as Roberta had seen.

The concrete yard behind it was a different matter. Six trailer boxes were set side by side, all connected by welded walkway. They were lead to the last trailer in line, guarded by a young, heavily armed militia man who saluted as they approached, then opened the door.

"Lord, this is a bleak place, Captain Fender." Roberta said.

"It's seldom used, M'am. Just the occasional drunk. We've been lucky."

"In there?"

"Yes, M'am."

"Hello Mr. Dengue." Roberta said. Dengue grunted. He was handcuffed to a metal table that was welded to the floor in the middle of the trailer. A barred skylight above, the only illumination, rimming the top of Dengue's greasy hair and casting a shadow over the table. Slowly, he looked up and Roberta could see his face was badly bruised.

"You are a BITCH!" Dengue screamed and started panting.

"And you are a thief, John Dengue." Roberta said quietly. She took a deep breath, and the paper Karl offered her, then began.

"John Dengue. Today, the district took a straw poll on your future here.

"Today the district decided that you are culpable of theft from the community.

"Today the district decided that this will be your last night within.

"Tomorrow morning you will be escorted to the gate and expelled. Forever.

“That is the...”

“I want a fucking lawyer! I want...” The guard backhanded Dengue who started sobbing.

“There are no lawyers anymore, Mr. Dengue,” Karl said. “It’s one of the only real boons of the apocalypse.”

In the pale light of the autumn dawn, Roberta and Karl sat on the seat of a horse drawn wagon next to its driver, an old man who kept muttering to himself as he flicked the reins. The horse, almost as old as its driver Roberta thought, kept wickering and tossing its mane in response. Behind them, in the bed of the wagon John Dengue stood, surrounded by guards.

They arrived at the gate and the guards escorted Dengue off the wagon, one removing his handcuffs, a second handing the man a brown valise, and a third trotting over to help the gate guard at the fence.

Dengue frowned at the bag in his hand and for the first time looked at Roberta.

“John Dengue,” Roberta said, “You must go. All your worldly possessions, except for firearms, are in the valise, as are two days worth of food. We wouldn’t want you to go hungry.

“Travel where you will, but never return to this district, Mr. Dengue. You really wouldn’t like the reception. Goodbye.”

Without a word Dengue walked through the open gate and up the road, pausing only once, to turn and give the district the finger... or perhaps, Roberta thought, the finger was for her.

chapter eight

Adela Torres

ROBERTA PUT THE PEN down and flexed her hand. Cramps. She had cramps. She missed her keyboard. Hell, she missed a typewriter, but try going vintage when the world had gone Dark Ages.

At least her office still had a lifetime supply of cheap but functional pens collected during meetings, visits, conventions and all the stuff that she used to do most of the time and that now had disappeared like soap down the drain.

Drains. There was another problem that was, right now, not making itself apparent but that would, soon enough. Right now pumps could not carry water to the high-rises and there was a flourishing network of water-carriers upstairs. Finally all those fitness nuts had something useful to do, she thought darkly. A town of bureaucrats and turns out we needed Amish.

Her desk was a mess, but the mess, after months of careful cultivation, was shaping into something more or less understandable. Piles of papers (*thank goodness we don't have to worry about paper for now, at least*) were classified by topic and urgency. Childcare, medicine, water, food, crowd control,

agriculture... Some piles overflowed from the table and had migrated to the floor. A helpful older secretary had taught Roberta the Dewey system so that she could keep track of what was where. *Never thought I'd miss Google.*

They were limping ahead, she thought. With the population reduced to that of a small town and telecommunications a thing of the past, the sense of urgency was diminished; no doubt tragedies were happening everywhere, but one was forced to deal with what was reachable, what was doable. What you knew. It took a while for Roberta to accept this, but she thought that now a sort of pacing had established itself. She had found a sort of routine: go to her office (set for convenience in the administration floor in the National Mall), gossip with the people that went there to get fresh produce or some of the rapidly-dwindling stocks of commodities such as tinned pineapple or prosciutto, and get a feeling for the day crisis. Sometimes it would be a delay in the carts coming from the farmed lands in and around the city. Some other times it would be a problem between neighbours, a dispute over food or chores. Most of it went along without her intervention, but people tended to sound her off for her opinion on many different matters, so it helped to keep a finger on the pulse of the city.

Then she would try to document everything and keep records of how and when problems were being handled, and then she'd go get some food. She was singularly unsuited for farm work and so she felt grateful that there had been a kind of unspoken agreement among the residents that the coordination services she was providing were enough to get her food and a small apartment close to the Mall. Her own home in the suburbs had become a sort of dream project for when she could afford the hours of travel and the hassle of

carrying food there to stay a while. Maybe a vacation? It had been roughly a year but it felt so much longer.

She made do: she dressed in slacks scrounged from the new thrift store in the Mall's ground floor and in pick-me-downs from some former colleagues that had also stayed in DC. No-one cared about white hair or wrinkles anymore. It was liberating and also a bit depressing. Roberta missed a good facial.

There was a knock at the door. Or rather a quick one-two rap that made Roberta say, "Come in, Nate".

Nate Yamada had been a janitor-cum-handyman in Congress, a sort of Jack of all trades that had earned a somewhat oracular reputation in the days before everything went to Hell. And afterwards he had kept doing what he did best: keep everything working. So now he was the go-to man for everything mechanic in the Mall and the unofficial contact for everyday matters to Roberta; they had hit it off quickly. Roberta found him a very easy man to work with and Nate seemed to appreciate Roberta's no-nonsense, don't-bullshit-me approach to problems.

"We have a problem, Berta."

"When don't we?," she sighed. But Nate's face was wearing a 'problem with a capital P' expression and Roberta's heart started racing after a hesitant skip.

"What is it?"

"A guy was working on the Mall's skylights and took a bad fall."

"He wasn't using a lifeline?" These may be the Dark Ages again, but by God if we haven't kept plastics and nylon around, Roberta thought. All passive security measures worked and were used to great advantage.

"No, he was, but it was freaky: he slid down, fell through

the hole left by the missing skylight plexiglass cover, swung and hit a metal ceiling beam, hard. We think he has internal lesions."

"Damn. Where is he?"

"We didn't dare move him. We've sent for the Mall doctor, but today she was supporting other doctors doing some rounds downtown."

"Okay. Send word to Storage and have them send the latest inventory of medical supplies to where he... What's his name?"

"Bob Manners."

"To where Bob is. Because that's where the doctor would be or already is, I hope. When was this?"

Nate checked his watch. His mechanical, wind-up watch. Thank Heaven for old-minded people.

"I dunno, thirty, forty minutes ago? The time it took me to check on him, call the doctor, have people make him more or less comfortable and come up here."

Roberta was rummaging in one of her document piles. After a few seconds of frantic searching she emerged with a triumphant "Hah!" and a piece of papers with a list scribbled in a small, nearly-illegible hand.

"I have an inventory, but it's old. Anyways, let's go down."

Nate hesitated, but nodded. Roberta understood; there was precious little she could do for an injured man, but she felt her presence was somehow needed, if only to bring an appearance of control.

The Mall had changed from a colourful, plastic consumer's paradise to a more warehouse-like and practical space in which people could go for basic necessities and some social interaction. Roberta knew it inside and out but even if she didn't she didn't have the slightest problem finding the

problem.

There was a crowd gathered around a small, macabre tableau: a large black man was lying prone on some blankets, his face pinched and grey with pain. There was blood on his coveralls and his breathing was labored. A woman was kneeling by his side, taking his hand and apparently praying over him. Roberta's expression closed, turned neutral. As soon as she arrived at the outside ring of people some of them recognized her and made a path for her. Nate followed like a small, efficient pilot fish.

"Any news from the doctor?" Roberta asked, bluntly and clearly. This broke the scene quite effectively as some onlookers told her that they had sent runners on bikes to fetch her and that maybe she'd be too late and he was dying anyway. The praying woman looked up, affronted at the interruption, but then she recognized Roberta and her face took on a wary expression.

"Our Lord will help him," she said, a tad defiantly.

"I have no doubt," Roberta smiled. Then she turned to the crowd. "Some of you please go out and wait for the doctor. Bring her here as soon as she arrives. Is that you, Cheryl? Go to the main entrance, please. Ah, Tobias: please take this and go to the service entrance. Maybe the doctor will go there to pass through Storage and get supplies, tell her they should have an inventory ready for her but if not, here's an old one. Maybe it'll help; in any case I'll want it back. The rest of you please either join in silent prayer or go about your duties."

A few people left, but most of them stayed and started some murmured conversations in an almost normal tone. Roberta looked at the praying woman with a quick "Excuse me" expression and touched the man's face.

"Bob?"

The man opened his eyes, focused on her. He seemed in too much pain to speak, but he kind of smiled and his free hand pawed weakly, doing a loose thumbs up.

"Can you hear me, Bob? The doctor is coming. You'll be all right, don't worry. Just lie still."

At this point Roberta's bag of tricks was empty and all she could do was kneel by the man's side, feeling a bit ridiculous and rather worried. Her mind raced through some scenarios that went to the man dying then and there to her cramping from kneeling too long while everybody stayed there until nightfall.

Maybe ten minutes later—though they felt like ten hours to her—Nate touched her shoulder.

Doctor Adizah Harper was a large black woman of about sixty that seemed to possess all the energy that had been robbed to the world. She came winded, her usually neat bun in disarray, but she made her way through the crowd with a cheerful "Move, you motherfuckers!" Roberta thought she'd faint from relief. With a last look at Bob (who was still breathing and didn't seem to be worse or better) she tried to get up with as much dignity as she could. Nate helped her, unobtrusively.

Doctor Harper lowered her bulk between Roberta and Bob, so she couldn't see what was happening. Bob groaned, doctor Harper wheezed and grunted, and exhorted Bob to do several things like 'Breathe now, hold it, does it hurt, tell me when it hurts, don't be a smartass, okay, now hold on, this is gonna hurt, my man.'

The praying woman knelt there still, now praying to herself. The crowd was fascinated.

Finally doctor Harper rose like the tide and went to Roberta.

"Right. The bad news is that he has three broken ribs and a hemothorax: there's some blood pooling in his lung. The good news is that this is far less serious than it could have been. The ribs will heal OK but I need to drain the blood from the lung and it's gonna be a bit tricky without antibiotics. He's a big boy, should be able to weather it, though. We need to move him to the infirmary and get rid of the ducklings," she finished with a flourish that covered the enthralled crowd.

The 'ducklings' did not go 'Aww' but the feeling of tragedy had diminished considerably at this point and they reacted a little like kids being told that this was enough TV for today. *Boredom makes damn gossips of us all*, thought Roberta, a bit randomly.

"So he'll be fine?"

"He'll pull through, damn right," said doctor Harper, looking at Bob. It sounded like an order. Roberta stopped herself from saluting this magnificent display of self-assuredness and went to give some orders of her own to move the injured man to the Mall's infirmary.

chapter nine

Simon Horn

“BUT WHY DIDN’T WE stop to talk to them?”

As usual, Jeff was in a hurry — and thought he knew better.

“Those people working in the Arboretum, they might have helped us.”

Oliver Kelly looked down at him, hesitating.

“Their sentry didn’t look very friendly,” he said. “Besides, they were felling trees, I don’t think people cutting down trees would have been much help, and I’m not sure they were part of the D.C. Centre group. You just keep your eyes open and be ready with that rifle, just in case.”

“OK.”

The 16-year-old didn’t look happy, but he usually didn’t, Ollie thought.

“And remember, don’t fire if you don’t get the word,” he continued.

So far they’d been lucky. The 40-mile trek from the Chesapeake had seen a few tense moments, but no violence. The few communities they had passed through were mainly eager for them to leave; nobody wanted new mouths to feed,

or trouble.

The little caravan continued down Maryland Avenue. The buildings were deserted, though sometimes they seemed to catch site of movement down the side streets. The sound of axes biting into trees in the Arboretum had long since faded, and now all they could hear was the clip-clop of their three horses, each pulling a rubber-tired cart whose bulky contents were hidden under tarpaulins.

There were seven in the group, five men and two women, though Jeff was still a boy, really. Maggie and Bill were a couple in their '30s. José carried a second rifle. He and Helen were both in their early '20s. Adam was the patriarch at 65.

They all had guns, of course, though most were hidden in the carts. If there was one thing America had no lack of it was guns. America was awash in guns, as well as a fair number of people prepared to use them without reasonable provocation. Of course, a lot of those had died in the general breakdown, when all the others had decided that trigger-happy idiots were not an aid to survival.

All the little group had in common was Ollie's plan — and a desire to get out of Annapolis.

“Oliver,” Adam had said when Ollie first broached the idea, “I could stay here pulling weed out of vegetable beds until my back gives out — or the lack of my blood pressure pills does me in — or I can try to do something, with you. The people here are nice enough, but what happens when our clothes wear out, or we have a really bad winter? I don't know, but you're right...the key question is power. How do we generate power?”

Ollie's idea really had started when he considered the ships. Annapolis had ships, boats, all kinds of water craft, and ships had generators and electrical equipment galore. Much was

damaged, of course, but certainly they could be fixed, they just didn't have fuel or electricity to run on any more. So while "the Storm", as the event was often called, had melted every transformer in the world simultaneously, electricity still worked! Ollie remembered reading, years ago, a sci-fi novel where electricity stopped working altogether, and people had no alternative but to return to a pre-industrial world. Well now the world, as far as anyone knew, was definitely back in a pre-industrial state, but electricity still worked, so the question was, how to generate it. And then Ollie had remembered that the Capitol building had its own power plant.

The caravan had just passed around Stanton Park and back onto Maryland Avenue when Maggie cried out, "Look, there it is! You can see the Capitol."

At almost the same instant a loud voice had called out, "You there! Stop! Point your weapons down." accompanied by the sound of rifles being cocked.

Roberta Miguel stood looking over the rows of vegetables and many weeders that now filled The Ellipse. She was tired. Very tired. She felt like she had been tired for at least 13 and a half of the past 14 months. Since the Storm. Somehow she had become the coordinator, if you like, of the D.C. Centre district, first keeping people safe, then organizing the initial scavenging – while trying to prevent disorganized looting during the exodus, then organizing food production... it had been easier when she was Speaker of the House!

But she also felt bored! How could she be bored? She hardly had time to think, let alone be bored. But she was. It felt like running on a hamster wheel: you could never stop but you never got anywhere. And she was worried about the coming winter. They had got through the last one, just, but

people had died. If the coming winter was a bad one... Bored and worried.

“Ms. Miguel?”

The voice came from a lanky young guard, who was accompanying an equally lanky older man, a stranger. Miguel liked to think she knew everyone, and he was definitely a stranger.

“This man would like to speak with you,” the guard continued.

“Ms. Miguel? My name is Oliver Kelly. I have a proposition for you.”

When Kelly’s caravan had been stopped back on Maryland Avenue, the next few minutes had definitely been tense. However, as so often before, Adam’s calm authority had defused the situation. It had taken a bit of time for the three guards who had stopped them to find a superior officer, but after that things moved quickly. The caravan had been escorted down to the National Mall where it now waited, surrounded by guards, while Kelly was taken to see a Roberta Miguel, who was apparently in charge. They had not been disarmed, as such, but their weapons had been placed in one of the carts under the careful eye of an armed guard, while the party sat on the grass and waited.

Miguel and Kelly sat on a bench under some trees on the other side of Constitution Avenue. The lanky guard stood a few yards away, keeping an eye open.

“Now, what do you want to tell me, Mr. Kelly?”

So Oliver told his story.

Had she not been in such a funk of worry and overwork, Roberta would probably have dismissed Kelly as some crank

and refused even to listen. As it was, his basic point, “it can’t go on like this”, coincided with her own mood precisely.

“Well, “she said, “I don’t know if I believe this is even possible, but if there was a way, if we could generate enough electricity to power a basic hospital, street lights... it could make all the difference.”

Oliver looked at her. “How did you become the leader here?” he asked

“I’m not,” Miguel answered, “not officially anyway. I report to the town meeting – we have some transplanted New Englanders here and they convinced people that town meeting was a suitable political structure for the current situation. In any case, as long as the town meeting thinks I’m doing a good job I keep doing it. We aren’t very enthusiastic about permanent positions, not since the collapse.”

“Can I ask what happened to President Gray and his people?”

“They mainly took off,” said Miguel, “when they couldn’t live in the style to which they had become accustomed. A few of them stuck around, like Amelia Khan, who deals with the health care situation, such as it is, and Darren Marshall; who would have thought that the Secretary of Agriculture knew anything about farming, but he’s been invaluable.”

It was Roberta’s turn to look at Oliver.

“Why here?” she asked. “Why not try this... project back at home?”

“Too small,” he answered. “This is going to take people, at least a hundred, for at least a week just to get started, people who are good with their hands and prepared to learn. Back in Annapolis it’s such a struggle to get from one day to the next that nobody can think of anything else. And they have plenty of wood, so people don’t think about the power problem

much, yet. I tried, but the phrase I tended to hear was ‘hair-brained scheme’.

“We’d heard that you were pretty well organized here, so it seemed more possible. Besides, I couldn’t help thinking of the Capitol Power Plant, big enough to be useful if we can get it running, but not so big as to be impossible. I figure we might repurpose it to burn wood instead of gas or coal, if we can get the electricians working. But really what I’m thinking of is wind power – there are a lot of tall buildings in D.C.”

“Well,” said Roberta, “I think this will take a lot more discussion. There are a few other people I would like you to explain the idea to before we decide to take it to town meeting. But first we should find you and your people a place to stay – there are plenty of available buildings.”

Within a short time Kelly and the others were temporarily housed in an apartment not far from the Capitol, next to an empty gas station with room for the carts and horses to be secured.

What happened next would depend on whether Roberta Miguel could convince enough people to support Kelly’s “hair-brained scheme”.

“I think this is just crazy. Electricity is gone and we just have to make the best of it.”

The speaker was a short man of about 50, one of some 250 people standing and sitting in what had once been the U. S. House of Representatives chamber, but was now the meeting place for the D.C. Center district town meeting. Miguel and Kelly had spent the previous 10 days trying to build support for Kelly’s project, and now was the time for a decision.

“We’re doing all right,” the man continued, “and I don’t see

why we should ask for 100 people to leave their usual activities to work on this hair-brained scheme.”

The arguments had been predictable, and raucous, and while Kelly wasn't surprised, he was disappointed:

“It will never work!”

“Look where technology led us in the past: disaster.”

“We can take care of ourselves.”

“Who are these strangers anyway?”

Kelly tried again to explain why his idea could work, and why it was needed, but the reactions were not very encouraging.

It was Miguel's intervention that turned the tide.

“People, you are right,” she said. “We *are* doing well, because all of you working hard, every day. We got through last winter despite the horrible conditions. We *are* growing enough to feed ourselves. We *do* have plenty of wood.

“But I would like you to remember what it was like last winter... and how many people we lost because we started running out of food, and because we couldn't provide adequate medical care. Right now we are stockpiling food, but fresh vegetables will be a problem. We have plenty of wood... now. But as time goes on we have to go further and further to get it, and we will start bumping up against other settlements who will want it. And what happens when we starting running out of new clothes? We've stockpiled everything we could get from stores and warehouses, but what about when that is gone.

“We have to find a way to start making things again, and we can't do that without power. With electricity there are factories that could be used again, without it they are useless. I think Mr. Kelly's scheme is possible. There is no guarantee, but I think it is worth trying. This winter, if we could simply

power a small hospital to treat our sick... well it would be worth the effort.”

When the vote came Kelly’s plan was approved, by a two-thirds majority. Volunteers would be called for, and Kelly and his group would be provided with food and shelter for two months. After that the town meeting would have to decide what happened next.

As the assembly broke up and left the chamber, Roberta glanced at Ollie: “When they learn that you want to put windmills on top of the Capitol, you might get a bit more resistance.”

chapter ten

S.R. Martin

Journal Entry,

Wednesday, October 21, 2020

Oliver Kelly

DC Lights Project Lead (Acting)

I thought it would be good to start a personal journal regarding our project. I apologize for my handwriting. It has been a while since I wrote longhand. My engineering notes are usually in block letters and numbers, and they do not intone anything other than the technical ideas to be communicated.

As I have had a double scotch and am filling up the glass again, I feel compelled to explain what we have done. I'll clean up this journal entry and write a separate paper so I can share it publicly. But for now, just know that I am able to write and read and... see! In the dead of night, in the middle of the House chamber, I can see, clearly. No candles. No sardine oil lamps.

Before I first came here to D.C., I had a glimmer of the idea that could bring power back, and I decided it had to be scalable, such that a small prototype could be built as proof of concept. It's all about the basics: the theories of electromagnetism, coupled with Newton's laws of motion, and thermodynamics. If I ever doubted why I had to slave away at physics and chemistry courses in my college years, I know now why it was so important.

First things first. I had to do some research. My sketches and notes were not definitive. I needed validation. Since it would have been a random occurrence to stumble upon a physics professor who decided to tough it out here inside the beltway, I chose to go straight to the Library of Congress. With three candles from a beekeeper in Alexandria and a splinter of flint from one of the congressional aids camped out on the Mall, I visited the giant library. I brought some of the team with me to distributed the work. We had to search the library without benefit of computer lookup.

The candles didn't last long. I discussed the situation with one of the volunteers - I don't recall his name, but he worked with Iain Thomson at the Department of Energy; smart kid. He ran my notes against several books he found in the windowless catacombs of shelves below ground level. I yelled out to the group to return to the main level, where I announced that we had our validation.

The books contained the mechanical equations needed to design the right gear ratios for a transformation of potential energy to kinetic energy, slowly regulated to produce just the right rate of revolution of a magnet around a coil of copper to release a local stream of electrons to an LED bulb (lowest practical wattage, of course).

And how would this mechanical transformer be driven?

Not by solar energy, which required circuitry sensitive to the ongoing disturbance from space...

Perhaps I should mention my current thinking on what caused this. Sorry for the jump, but my second Scotch is kicking in. Better that I get these thoughts down, even if a bit jumbled.

The only newspaper I was able to get before the effects of the power loss rendered mass distribution of information impossible stated that the aurora we saw on August 29 of last year was the manifestation of a Gamma Ray Burst (GRB) from a nearby star. Very near, in fact, for scientists apparently did not have a chance to evaluate its origin.

I am no astronomer, but I can pick my way through the constellations. The next evening was a clear one at my home in Mountain View, California. I stayed up all night sitting in a folding chair on a patch of green space near my apartment searching the sky for some evidence of a... I don't know, a nova. A supernova. Some explosion.

Nothing appeared.

Then I thought, the next closest star to our sun is the Alpha Centauri system. It's near the Southern Cross. We can't see it from California.

I wonder if we will ever know about what caused it. How the hell can the Australians tell us what they saw without Internet, or satellite phone or radio?

I digress. That is a problem for some new shipbuilder to solve.

On Sunday, two days after the library trip, I grouped the volunteers into specialties: those who had some knowledge of motors and electronics, and those who had mechanical knowledge. Some of them... well, some of them were pretty useless. But I paired them up with the mechanics and

electricians so that they might learn.

The assignment for these groups: find gears, pulleys, chains, ropes, old motors and several other items necessary for carpentry, plus tools. I wanted it all brought back to the Capitol steps by sundown. And I promised them all a nice dinner of legumes and grasses, although I had tentative plans to provide some fresh meat cooked to perfection by the couple of two-meter solar ovens I hid inside my de facto office next to that of the Speaker of the House.

Excuse me; the former Speaker of the House.

Anyway, my young associate from Energy (upon further reflection, I think his name is Jeff) and I stayed back cooking steaks that I traded for a bushel of beets harvested from my designated lot at the Arboretum and four sets of horseshoes I found while scouring the archives at the Smithsonian. It was only seven steaks, and I could not tell which part of the cow they came from. It didn't matter - it was protein, and it was enough to feed our ninety-plus volunteers, sliced thinly.

As we made sketches of a scaled-up version of our local power generation system, Jeff would occasionally lose his train of thought and look at the ovens intently. I had placed both ovens on the landing at the top of the steps. They were merely half cylinders of shiny sheet metal bent to an optimal parabolic shape. They each had a wire mesh shelf suspended in front of the curve. It took two to three hours to cook whatever was placed on the shelves, if you shifted the ovens' positions as the sun's angle changed.

Jeff broke out of one of his intent gazes and said, "You know, with the proper heat source, you can generate steam."

"Yeah, I know that," I said. "There are plenty of people generating steam with solar reflectors. I didn't select that option for our study because of the potential dangers. That,

and I don't think they could be built as fast or scaled to as large as we need. Not without the American steel infrastructure shut down."

"Power is not what I am thinking about," he said. "It's refrigeration. I remember an invention by an engineer way back in the nineteenth century. It was a guy named Steering. Or Sterling. He built an engine that ran a piston when exposed to a heat source."

"Sounds a lot like a steam engine," I said.

"No, it was different. There is no steam, and the engine is very efficient because the pistons are frictionless. They are suspended in oil."

"Okay, so what is its application?"

Jeff smiled and held up an index finger. "Refrigeration."

"So you said."

He scribbled on his note pad a simple diagram with a network of tubes and a box labeled "Steering Engine".

"That's how we can build a refrigerator powered by solar heat," said Jeff.

I was incredulous at first. He convinced me that he could substantiate his claim and that there should be a reference to the engine's design in the Congressional library. I released him from solar barbecue duty and gave him a small candle so he could run off to conduct his research.

As the steaks began to sear the first of the volunteers returned across the cattle field that made up the front half of the Mall. Within an hour, the steps below the solar ovens were a menagerie of old parts and motors, chains, tackle and numerous tool boxes.

I had set up a folding table on the landing where I placed a five gallon jug of tap water and a piece of marble from an antique cadenza in one of the old senate offices. Using the

fork and knife from my own mess kit, I sliced the steaks and placed the small portions on the volunteers mess kit plates as they shuffled by. From a small kettle, I put a few spoons of raw beans on the side.

There was one grizzled and thin mechanic who had somehow lost his cup. You can't lose your cup. That's rule number one in our new reality. But he did. So I gave him mine. I still haven't found another one. And that has been an unneeded distraction.

(I'm going to keep this glass holding my Scotch...)

The steaks and beans were eaten, the sun was setting, and the volunteers broke off their conversations and slowly disbursed. I watched the last of them head back across the pasture in their protective groups of two, three, and four or more and disappear in between the buildings that lined the Mall.

Jeff hadn't returned.

It's not a good thing to go unaccounted for as evening falls, even with the lack of population in the District. There are still some seamier elements stationed about, some stragglers who refuse to move on - and who, on occasion, raid the gardens, steal a cow or two, and allow themselves to express their fears and frustration with violence. The thieves I can understand. Everyone is hungry. But the violence... what is the point of it now? Yet, it is a reality.

And Jeff had not returned.

I wiped the grease off the reflective inner curves of the ovens, dragged them back inside to the Rotunda, then walked swiftly to the back exit of the Capitol. I bounded down the steps and ran over to the Library.

As I approached the steps of that building, Jeff emerged, his head bent down over an open volume. He was in deep

thought.

I have learned in my time not to disturb a scientist or engineer engaged in concentrated study. The best ideas and solutions come from such behavior, and it is not to be interrupted.

But I interrupted him anyway.

"Why did it take you so long?" I yelled up at him.

He looked up and snapped the book closed. "It's not 'Steering'. His name was Stirling, S-T-I-R-L-I-N-G."

I took a deep breath and realized once again that the loss of the Internet and its search engines had slowed progress on many - most? - tasks to a crawl.

Jeff and I... yes, his name is Jeff. Funny, I haven't called him by his name in these past four days that I have known him. He has become indispensable. I should know his damn name. I'll remedy that situation tomorrow...and confirm it.

So that evening, Jeff and I discussed the particulars of the Stirling engine. The book he swiped from the library gave enough detail to build a model if we could find more materials and tools. The principle of heat exchange, a fundamental basis of thermodynamics, makes it all possible. The only hard part is designing and constructing the frictionless piston assembly.

And we would have to do it with unpowered tools, using existing materials. Nevertheless, we committed to pursue this as a side project.

Jeff found an unoccupied senatorial office and camped out on the couch within it.

I brought my candle kit with me and walked down the hall to the Speaker's office.

The sun had set, but I could still find my way by the light from several open office doors. I reached the Speaker's door

and knocked loudly, three times, then two, then three times again. It was our code.

She cracked the door. "Yes? What can I do for you, Oliver?"

"I wanted to let you know about our progress today on the light project. And something else that is quite exciting."

I looked past her to her desk. On it sat the prototype. It was operating.

She nodded back in its direction. "Twenty minutes, I think. It seems like twenty minutes. Hell, I can't tell anymore."

"That's good," I said. "Based on sand timing, I got it to work a half hour. So it should last another ten minutes."

She motioned me in and pointed to the chair in front of her desk. No candles were lit. Yet the unmistakable blue-white glow of a single LED bathed the room in dim, cool light.

She sat in her leather chair behind the desk and waved dismissively at the model in front of her. "Thirty minutes is nice, for a small light. But frankly, Oliver, I can't read anything by this. It's not bright enough."

I said, "That's where the scaling comes in. We can build a larger model that might illuminate this whole room."

"Its not a very big room," she said.

I didn't respond to that, but to me, the Speaker's office is bigger than any office I've ever had, especially with the attached meeting room.

She bent forward and narrowed her eyes. "You know what I want to see."

I sighed apologetically. "I do, indeed, Madame Speaker. But I think it would be better to gradually scale this up. Mainly for safety."

"Safety?"

"Yes. Think about it. This device uses gravity. The little counterweight on this small prototype would have to be much larger for what you are thinking about. Heavier. Tons, perhaps. Held by strong chains and pulleys, and suspended from a structural member - "

"A structural member? What does that mean?" she said.

"Or a tower."

"A tower?"

"Madame Speaker, I am talking about building these on a scale two hundred to one thousand times the size of the model on your desk."

She stood up and walked over to a cabinet near the window. With her back to me, she poured a drink. One drink. None for me.

"You know what I want," she said.

"I do," I said.

"Oliver, I am no longer the Speaker. There are no budgets. There are no schedules. Those days seem to be gone. In a strange way, I don't miss them."

She took a sip of her drink, put it down and turned to face me.

"The... symbology. Oliver, the symbology; the message it would send."

"I get it."

"The notion that if we can do it here, we can do it elsewhere in Washington. Elsewhere in the United States, and elsewhere in the world."

I shifted in my chair and shook my head. "To get what you want, twenty-four hours of electrical power on the basis of a gravity system... I can't tell if we have the resources, either human or material. The troops left a bunch of parts - "

"Troops?"

"Yes, the volunteers you assembled for me."

"Troops... yes."

"They brought enough for the next higher sized model. Not big enough for what you want."

"Then, what about the backup generators?"

I shook my head. "Those are diesel engines. I've told you before that the sparks don't work anymore."

"Not the diesel part," she said. "The motor. The electrical motor."

"You mean the magnetic inductor?" I shivered, although it was not cold. "The inductors on the Capitol's backup power generators... have you seen them? They are encased in metal, with big bolts the size of - "

"Somebody must have had to service them. Did you find any of their tools?"

I blushed, and said, "Honestly, I haven't thought about it, since the scale is beyond what we can do."

"Are you sure about that?" she said. "I gave you a hundred able people. Are you certain you cannot take advantage of those motors now - "

"Now?"

"Right now." She approached my chair and stood above me.

I hadn't realized it until then, but in the dim light of the room, her face shaded on one side, she appeared to me as a gun moll from an old black and white noir film. Her business suit, one of the three that I had noticed her wearing on alternating days, had pointed shoulders. Her Puerto Rican heritage gave her a classic beauty, at least in the light of the one LED on her desk.

And yet, she had the characteristic smell that surrounded us all nowadays, since the soap ran out.

Yes, we all stink. Now I know what it was like in ancient Rome.

But I digress...

I left her office with the puzzle of upscaling beyond our current capabilities.

We aren't a major corporation. Our supply chain is whatever we can salvage from abandoned machines and shops. Our workforce is a sampling of the previous population, many of whom are incapable of contributing meaningfully.

After a night spent tossing on the couch in my senate office, I decided to survey one of the eight generators. I woke up Jeff and told him to hurry up. I brought him a sawdust-like cake from an MRE in my stash. He put it in his shirt pocket, drank a cup of tap water and combed his hair in front of a mirror in the parlor.

"Why did you do that?" I said. "Nobody is looking at your hair."

"I am," said Jeff.

We took a couple of candles each and descended to the lower level of the Capitol, passed the old cafeteria, and located the access tunnel to the generators.

"Do you remember the way back?" I asked Jeff.

"I think so," he said.

"If these candles go out, follow me and I will walk us along the wall by the cafeteria."

I entered first and found the nearest generator. It smelled of oil and diesel fuel. The gunmetal gray casing stood above our heads. The inductor motor housing was behind the diesel engine, joined by a hexagonal shaft.

Jeff said, "It's not as big as I thought."

"It's plenty big," I said. "To get that shaft to spin properly will require more weight than ten people can lift."

“Remember, we’re going to use pulleys.”

“You’re right.”

“And we have a hundred people.”

I laughed. “Can you imagine all of them pulling on ropes and chains to pull that damn weight up to the ceiling of the - “

“I can indeed,” said Jeff, seriously. “We’ve got the combined human power to lift a sizable counterweight.”

“What about horses?” I said. “I can work with some of the farmers on trade for some hours.”

“We will have enough lifting power. That’s not the initial problem. We need to drag this thing out of the building and then move it up the front steps.”

“How did the Egyptians do it?”

“With ropes, logs and an army of people.”

The candles were getting low, so we left the ground floor and continued to plan on the front landing. Many of our troops had returned. A new plan emerged.

The next two days saw us retrieving massive pulleys from the Navy Yard across the river, carting them back one at a time with the assistance of a Mall farmer and his two horses.

A makeshift ladder fashioned from the side of a downed electrical tower enabled some of the more courageous of our group to ascend to the ceiling of the House Chamber, where a series of looping ropes secured the top of the ladder. We then built a scaffold around the ladder by reassembling one we had found on the facade of a building on K Street.

The hustle of the team was matched by their appetites. We enlisted the help of two farm families in the arboretum to provide food in return for anything they could find in our stash of tools. It wasn’t really a fair trade; they could make more food, but we could not replace the tools. Still, we knew where to look for them if we really needed them.

After two whole daytimes of work, our Egyptian pyramid team of scroungy men and woman had installed the pulley system to the ceiling of the House Chamber.

The next chore, the transfer of the inductor motor from the basement, was tricky, but with some salvaged plywood and round posts cut from a downed power pole, the motor was successfully rolled through the access tunnel that connected the Capitol to the Library of Congress, and up an access ramp designed for service trucks to deliver food to the cafeteria. The transport around the north side of the Capitol was relatively easier, although our troops required frequent breaks for water and rest.

I mused at the sight of men in suits and ladies in dresses lifted from the American history museum at the Smithsonian pulling on ropes, pushing the motor and transferring the metal posts to the front of the platform as the motor inched its way along the sidewalk to the front steps of the Capitol.

I helped too, of course. And I was dressed in my suit, which was formerly worn by President Woodrow Wilson.

Through herculean effort of both people and horses, the motor moved to its place on the floor of the House of Representatives. While I worked with the crew transporting the motor, Jeff had supervised the building of a robust tower of bolted steel girders salvaged from the Navy Yard. Surrounded by the scaffolding original used to hoist the ladder, the tower resembled an oil derrick in Texas.

The next day, yesterday, in fact, the final gear matching was completed. The design only took two gears to regulate the descent of the counterweight. I would not have believed the assembly could be ready for review by myself and the Speaker. Clearly, everyone was motivated.

The final cable connections required the electricians of the

team to patch in to the Capitol's intricate electrical network. They did this without prior knowledge of the wiring layout.

Late last evening, a steady stream of the archaically-dressed troops filled the "cage", the metal box that constitutes the counterweight of our gravity-powered system. They filled it with the densest materials we could find: metal and stone from the Capital itself, chiseled away from the southern exterior of the building.

Around nine o'clock in the evening (it felt like nine o'clock, but who can really tell) I strode to the Speaker's office and rapped my code on the door.

She opened it. I announced that we were ready to demonstrate the device.

Candles in hand, we neared the entrance to the House chamber. A soft white glow leaked under its closed double doors.

As the Speaker stood safely behind me, I unlatched both doors and moved them fully open.

I looked back at her to see her mouth agape, her free hand on her cheek. She was bathed in the light from the chamber.

I walked in and extended my hand to her. "Is this what you had in mind?" I asked.

"I... that's gotta go," she said tersely, pointing her candle at the scaffolding.

"That's just temporary," I said. I blew out my candle.

She blew out hers, then smiled.

From the top of the tower five LED flood lights in parabolic reflective hoods beamed illumination across the chamber. From its position above the left side of room, it shined toward the empty desks of the representatives.

"I suppose you couldn't move it to the back of the chamber," said the Speaker.

“No, I think our troops would revolt,” I said.

“Let’s not start a revolt,” she said. “Not today.”

She walked past the inductor at the base of the tower. It hummed as the transformer gears rotated its shaft.

She looked above her at the counterweight cage. “That thing’s not going to fall, is it?”

“Oh, no,” I said. “All Navy Yard surplus. Good stuff.”

She walked up to the dais and took her former position in the chair of the Speaker of the House. She smoothed the armrests as she surveyed the chamber, peering into the gallery.

“I can see the back row,” she said. “Good.”

Then she stood and approached the lectern. She bent down and retrieved a gavel; her gavel from the cabinet below.

She grinned at the collection of workers, the troops who stood around the Chamber. She raised the gavel and brought it down hard onto the lectern.

She said loudly and distinctly, “I now declare this session of the Interim Congress in session.”

The troops erupted in shouts and applause.

“Somebody get a news person. I want this message relayed immediately.”

I joined her on the lectern, and the troops raised their voices again.

She leaned up to my ear and said, “Come back to my office after this.”

The counterweight continued to lower, slowly. The inductor motor hummed.

The light shone.

And now I am sitting in the office of the Speaker of the House of Representatives, who has told me never to call her “Madame Speaker” again. She is Roberta to me now.

As I finish writing this, she is preparing my third Scotch.
This time, with an ice cube from her new makeshift Stirling refrigerator.

chapter eleven

Mirela Vasconcelos

ROBERTA SAT BACK IN the chair and sighed contentedly, dabbing a discolored cloth napkin to her lips before placing it atop her clean plate. It'd been near impossible to find any pure white cloth for months, but people made due, as they always did. This particular napkin had seen some life during the year or so since everything had changed, its edges were frayed and countless stains adorned it from lack of bleach and ample use. This wasn't to imply it hadn't been thoroughly cleaned and disinfected. Maye, the owner of the diner, took special care to ensure things were as presentable as possible. She even took the extra step of folding the napkins neatly at each place setting. The disarrayed appearance of the napkins or any other superficial thing, thought Roberta, said nothing about the resilience represented by their use. How they symbolized the collective will to keep fighting and surviving, attempting to live as normally as possible despite what could only aptly be called the apocalypse...

“Honey, are you in a stupor from supper?” Maye asked in a friendly mocking tone as she collected the plate and napkin.

“Or is it something serious? You were eyein’ your table as though you were at an interrogation or somethin’,” she added more genuinely.

“Just lost in thought, Maye,” Roberta smiled up at the large woman. “Dinner was absolutely divine, as always, thank you. What would we do without you?” She motioned to the others sitting about the diner also enjoying their evening meal. At least three times a week Roberta would dine at Maye’s Corner, one of the few establishments to remain open in the District after the Event. Once word of Maye’s intentions to continue working reached Roberta, she made herself an ally, helping to make connections where she could, knowing the diner would not only help feed many who either couldn’t cook for themselves or didn’t have the time, but would also serve as a social artery of sorts. Many in the District arranged for a portion of, or sometimes their entire ration to be delivered directly to Maye in exchange for daily meals. These arrangements always included a little something extra for Maye’s trouble, of course. In Roberta’s case, she had bartered a third of her rations along with regular monthly deliveries of Tampax boxes in exchange for weeknight dinners.

“You’d find someone else to cook all your meals,” Maye responded matter-of-factly. “But I ain’t goin’ anywhere anytime soon!” She raised her voice to be heard amid the noisy dinner conversations as she walked Roberta’s plate to the back counter, placed it down and grabbed the ledger before returning and continuing in her normal tone. “I knew from the get I should stay here. Big things *would* happen here first - you think I believe a lick of this talk of Gray ‘going missing?’” Maye emphasized her point with air quotes.

Roberta began to reply, but was cut off by Maye placing the ledger book before her on the table. “Now, I know you’ll

deny my suspicions honey, it's practically your job. And to be honest, I couldn't care less where that useless excuse for a man is right now anyway," Maye pulled out a pen from her apron pocket and indicated where Roberta should sign. "That Mr. Kelly's done the job for 'im, answered all our prayers, he has. Given us hope. First the Capitol Building and next, the whole District! It's all any of us talk about these days. You know some of us had forgot what artificial light even looked like!" She barked a laugh, "Folks've started walking by the Capitol Building at night just to see the lights now, kind'a how we used to do during Christmas time when I was a girl. All thanks to Mr. Kelly."

"I have noticed the increase in traffic at night!" Roberta returned Maye's pen after verifying the ledger and signing her name. "It is nice to see so much activity once the sun's gone down. I didn't realize how much I'd missed that. You know, I've enjoyed seeing the lights back on as much as anyone, I've even found an excuse to stop by the Capitol every night since the power's been restored," she admitted with a sheepish chuckle. "I'm on my way there now."

"Alright, honey," Maye said, collecting the rest of the items off the table. "Oh! If you run into little Abby, tell her not to stay out too late again! Girl's been sneaking off to the Capitol at night to read, what can I tell you? Says it doesn't compare to candlelight!"

"Sure thing, Maye! See you," Roberta quickly ducked out of the small diner, offering Maye a final wave from outside the storefront windows.

She deliberately avoided talk of Oliver Kelly. Harder said than done when he and his team were practically hailed as heroes and everyone wanted to sing his praises. Roberta simply couldn't shake the feeling that something was off about him,

despite his manicured appearance. Hearing him speak put others at ease and made them excited for the future, but all Roberta felt was a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. No one else seemed to question the obscurity of his past or his motives beyond getting power back to the city. All they seemed to register was that he would do it, and once he succeeded with the Capitol Building, nothing else mattered. Maye wasn't the right person to talk to about her suspicions, and in any case, she didn't want to risk being overheard. For now, at least, it was best to keep her thoughts to herself until she had some form of evidence besides her gut feelings.

Dusk had fallen when she rounded the corner onto Pennsylvania Avenue. The dome of the Capitol was in view ahead, its lights already glimmering against the backdrop of the night sky. A larger crowd than usual gathered around the outdoor stand that offered home brews and moonshine. The few stools before the counter where regulars usually sat were obscured by a swarm of bodies and it took Roberta a minute to realize the commotion was in commemoration of Kelly, who was seated as a guest of honor along with a handful of the men he brought with him. Empty mugs lay strewn about the counter, an indication the festivities had been ongoing.

“— America's hero!” Was all Roberta heard of what seemed to have been a heartfelt speech delivered by a man with a torn ‘SMITHSONIAN’ t-shirt before everyone rang out in cheers.

“Please, you're all too kind,” Kelly said, raising his hands in a gesture for the cheering to subside. In Roberta's mind, the action seemed to be second nature to him. In fact, everything about him seemed calculated, orchestrated for some larger purpose only known to him. Her eyes narrowed as she

continued to observe the scene. “I was just doing what I could for our country! Was it difficult? Yes! But did you believe in me anyway? Yes! And did we succeed!?” Much with the precision of a conductor, Kelly was met with another round of cheers.

Some of the men seemed uncomfortable with the attention they received, declining gifts and praise with timid comments about it being “all-in-a-day’s-work”, but not Kelly. He just flashed another toothy grin and reveled in the borderline adoration people offered him, gifts piling at his feet as if he were a Greek god.

Disgusted, Roberta decided she’d seen enough. Turning to leave, she recognized one of Kelly’s head engineers, Kaito Nakamura, smoking a cigarette alone a few feet from the crowded stand. It was the perfect opportunity to gather more information on Kelly and his plans while the former was occupied.

“You’re Kaito, right? One of Kelly’s engineers?” Roberta approached him.

“Just Kai is fine,” he responded, holding out his hand.

“Nice to meet you, Kai,” she said, shaking his hand. “You’ve been working with Kelly for a bit, right?”

“Ah, yeah, he recruited me shortly after the blackout.” Kaito offered Roberta one of his cigarettes but she shook her head politely.

“Oh, that’s surprising. You guys have been working at this since the beginning then?”

“Sure! Almost immediately. We started out west, but it wasn’t long before Kelly set his sights on DC specifically,” Kaito noticed her frown, and thankfully mistook it for confusion. “Well, you see,” he explained, “we were looking for someplace with a large backdrop power supply system. With a

large enough system, we can use the ample electricity to make what's needed to repair even larger power generation stations.”

“Exciting! Though it is a little difficult to believe you had to come all the way to the east coast for a large enough preliminary system. Why not just start where you were and work your way through larger systems from there?”

“Kai! Where'd you go?” Kelly's call rang out sharply, cutting their conversation before Kaito had the chance to respond.

Cursing her luck, Roberta decided to leave before risking recognition and questions. It wouldn't do for Kelly to know she was gathering information on him. “Oh, it looks like you're being summoned! We'll chat more next time.”

“Wait,” Kaito called after her as she hurried away. “I didn't even get your name!”

“Next time!” She shouted out to him without turning around. Roberta kept her head down and continued toward the Capitol Building. There was plenty to think over tonight.

chapter twelve

Cassandra Lee Yieng

A DAZZLING ARRAY OF lights blinded Roberta Miguel. She dismounted her grey mare, Gray, and, with her back turned towards the lights, tied it to a tree nearby. She'd bought it after her divorce and named it in honour of the previous president Andrew Gray, a namesake she'd regretted since the president's disappearance. The spiky dust in her peeling sandals wasn't as unbearable as when she'd started wearing them 14 months ago, but still she inched towards the lights in discomfort. The skies had fewer stars tonight.

The mysterious lights came from none other than her former workplace, the Capitol Building. It was reduced to a disheveled, moss-covered husk of its former splendour, and the moss assumed an interesting shade the Chinese called “anatine faecal green” in their language: the short supply of decent mass-produced cleaning gels was to blame. Roberta quite missed the once-popular catchphrase “go back to the way things were”. It reminded her of a vampire movie—yikes, an invention that hearkened back to the world of the dreaded “E” word—in which the opening line was, “I’m dead. But

that's okay, because I've learnt to live with it." Whereas her ex-husband used to say, like the rest of this grand country, "When the electricity is back, I'm going to..." A year on, it morphed into: "If Edison ever comes back, I'll..." Another year later: "Who cares if being primitive is a thing, I've learnt to live with it."

I've learnt to live with it. That was the foreign sentiment tormenting Roberta. She could imagine Carlos's voice among the naive campaigners of "All Hail Anarchy", a minor political sect whom she for many years had deemed too intellectual, too timid and too weak to take over inept governments. But she was wrong.

It's one thing to be content in all circumstances, including the absence of "E", as her once-religious upbringing dictated. The most serene swan on the lake still paddled wildly beneath the water surface. But who cared about internal chaos if you could mask it and keep a tight rein (pardon the horse pun; times like these) on the outside? Motives had never perplexed her in the grand scheme of things. She could have a technicolour conscience and still put beneficial policies into practice. That's how a Hispanic woman like her rose through the ranks in the shark-eat-shark world of politics. Ends and means never had to mingle for millennia, and she had seen through the philosophical bluff trying to connect both. What mattered was stuff got done.

But to be discontent with the devolution of human civilisation was an altogether different matter. Without broadcast media or the Internet, and now with former animal rights activists slinking away in the very skins they'd condemned and starry-eyed Jetsons-wannabes scraping by like the Flintstones—was she the only one who missed motion pictures? Hello?—Roberta felt something was amiss. Yes,

adaptation was key to the survival of the human race, but one couldn't *just* adapt. "Certain unalienable Rights" had to be maintained, and if dignity, decency and digitisation weren't among them, why weren't they?

Back when a worldwide plague rivalled the Black Death and everyone had to be homebound to avoid the new epidemic, the line "Thank God for technology" flooded gratitude journals online as people held virtual conferences within and across time zones, and performed music, drama and stand-up comedy. Roberta once envisioned such data could be kept in perpetuity, even though the Internet was stretched to its limits. When a disgraced journalist with Republican sympathies called for a "data emergency", no one responded, and the plague ended only a few hours before all those technological advances crumbled. Hardcopy backups were an afterthought.

No scholar had the liberty to explain what had been going on, not because they were "useful idiots" (sorry, Doris Lessing), but because there was no platform, no media, no means to broadcast to the anxiety-ridden, conspiracy theory-laden laypeople their fact-checked expert thoughts, or debate them with their just-as-knowledgable peers banteringly. Everyone had been distracting themselves from contracting the plague via digital infotainment without realising the grid, the backbone of their solace in confinement, was going down. Was it due to the Northern Lights (that was the last known explanation before everything went down)? Solar wind? Inversion of the earth's magnetic poles? Divine wrath? Humans being a mere dream of some evil deity who'd kill everyone once he awoke, as H. P. Lovecraft, her least favourite author, once suggested in his horrid noir? Existential meaninglessness? Whatever the reason, it wouldn't change this

sorry situation everyone was in.

As far as she was concerned, only Gutenberg worked; the first printing press didn't run on the movement of electrons. Everything was now written or printed, and everything analog or digital was rubbish—good news for non-geeks like her who'd flunked physics. If she'd passed it, she'd have been another academic hypocrite championing the cause for women in STEM yet slaving away on the publish-and-perish mill, and her physicist self in an alternate universe would be reduced to hard labour such as construction or plumbing, like her poor fellow countrymen, after the power cut. But enough of hypotheses. One had to get real. No TV, no radio, none of the conveniences she and the rest of the world had been enjoying. This was as close to hell as anyone in the developed world could get. All mouths, muted. If you were happy, you couldn't share the news with your friends or family across the globe. If you were sad, you had to grieve by yourself, like her sister Maria might have been doing in memory of Andrea. If you were angry, you couldn't vent anonymously and your shrinks had always warned you of the danger of bottled-up emotions and that you were just a humanoid C-4 all along and so, thanks to this regression of human progress, there's no antidote or trained professional to defuse you, or even know you existed. You were completely on your own.

The C-4 reminded Roberta of suicide bombers. Many such killers were recruited online. Thus, gun control was part of her political advocacy, and she defended immigrants. So many immigrants wanted to flee the thugs back "home" such as her late niece Andrea, Maria's talented firstborn who insisted that she not move to the States until she could study there. The leader of an infamous mob wanted this straight-A seventeen-year-old as his wife, and Andrea and Maria had been moving

house several times to avoid that gangster and his men. The day arrived when Andrea waved her mum goodbye at her doorstep, with her suitcase and a ticket bound for Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport that evening. Except that blood spurted from Andrea's head, and she collapsed. A week ago she'd secured a scholarship for a college in Texas, double-majoring in psychology and law, and she vowed she'd rescue her mother from their country once she'd graduated and got her green card. She'd also written dairies online for news outlets under a pseudonym, not unlike Malala Yousafzai. Cultivating the next female world leader almost to adulthood: much ado about nothing.

She missed the times "E" was taken for granted. But if it returned, it would return with a vengeance; all the societal ills would come tumbling back in as well. When Andrea and Maria last visited Roberta in Andrea's early adolescence, Andrea was phubbing Roberta in favour of her friends' Instagram likes. The phubbing worsened during the plague lockdown, according to Maria. Now Maria and Roberta couldn't even bring up Andrea's tech habits without a guilty conscience. Roberta felt relief for having no parent-related headaches. During courtship, she and Carlos had brought up the issue of raising kids, and they came to the wise consensus that bringing vulnerable children into a corrupt world was the least loving thing they could do. So, no kids, no worries, and no hassle when they divorced amicably, without any arguments over custody. After all, relationships were messy. Yes, they'd helped her reach high places, but that's all they're meant for: Darwin-enlightened monkeys scratching each others' backs. Her ex-husband was just another cog in the wheel, and now no wheels were turning except those in mechanical machinery, horse carriages, perhaps rickshaws in Asia, but she couldn't extend

her compassion to people she could no longer see. The TV, radio and Internet brought those hideous images to her, yet, as the saying went, “out of sight, out of mind”.

Roberta listened. A low rumble. In front of the mossy Capitol Building, Roberta mentally traced the outlines of a large power generator. It resembled a steam turbine the mad scientist Dr Emmett Brown built into a train carriage in the third instalment of *Back to the Future*—oh no, another movie. What were the non-electronic precursors to motion pictures? She didn't want any reminders of an electricity-driven past. Why did she keep missing relics the rest of the world had completely left behind? She was a diehard progressive, yet how could it be that her mind lagged behind? This wasn't right. Worse still, the colour of the steam turbine was, well, anatine faecal green, like the dishonoured national icon in the backdrop. Thanks to the intrusive new lights, there was no mistaking that colour. If not for the low-pitched noise, she wouldn't have noticed the generator, which was camouflaged at its finest-slash-crudest, that disgusting hue of ducks' droppings. One couldn't even touch anything avian these days, since proper sanitation had become a luxury. There was no soap produced en masse because there were no factories in operation because there was no electricity driving their machines. Industrialisation did humanity a grand favour—while its magic lasted.

An emaciated man emerged from behind the machine. Because of the immaculately-kept dark hair, Roberta expected him to be Asian, but he didn't have *that* build. It was a white man around her age. He extended a grubby hand towards her.

Roberta recoiled. “Sir?”

The man glanced at his hands. “Ah.” He wiped them downwards against his denim overalls, bowing as he did so—

he was rather tall. “Mrs Miguel, I’m Oliver Kelly. We’re bringing glory back to our great nation.”

Roberta held back the thought of citing some obscure law forbidding the building of great machinery. “Mr Kelly...”

“Call me Oliver.”

“Whatever. You’re the...” She couldn’t quite recall.

“Last recipient of the Thiel Fellowship, and the quiet rival of Buffett, Gates, Bezos, Musk, Zuckerberg and company.” Quiet, because he wasn’t active on social media and refused to be interviewed. Those who posted on his online profiles were his subordinates praising him. He regaled his tales of conquest in the global world of business. *As if he’s my suitor for marriage in those old-fashioned books nobody in their right mind reads anyway.* Roberta, a woman beyond mature, wasn’t going to fall for that. She’d handled enough fraud and manipulation during her political career, and the list went on like an “infinite scroll”—ouch, another reference to the dead digital planet. She winced.

“Are you still there, Mrs Miguel?”

She opened her mouth, but Oliver yakked about a vault he built long before the international outage. Roberta didn’t want to recall its hideous name. All those who’d been higher-ups, including her former self, knew about it because an article on its workings was neatly tucked away in the most esoteric subscriber-only pages of the *Harvard Business Review*. It stored his cryptocurrencies and digital assets, and, on social media, the vault was rumoured to be operated by multi-talented cyborgs (humanoid robots or humans with enhanced intelligence, no one was exactly sure) which could crunch numbers more efficiently than human data scientists back in the heyday of machine learning. This vault was the reason his combined wealth surpassed the nine moguls below him on the last published Forbes list of the world's billionaires. With

every “and” Oliver uttered in his infinite run-on sentence about his now-inaccessible treasure trove, Roberta’s brow furrowed more prominently. She wasn’t going to be reduced to a mere robotic or genetic or neuroscientific or financial existence, or be subject to an onslaught of conjunctions joining disparate ideas in someone’s not-so-humblebrag.

She snapped. “Cut to the chase.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He inhaled. “With the influence you’ve had, Mrs Miguel, as former Madam Speaker, you and I can join hands and cash, yes, we all know you’ve got a lot of green, and bring power back to Uncle Sam, and not just that, but I alone can grant you the role of Commander in Chief, so that’s power in the grids, power in the houses, power across the fifty wondrous states, and, with the Gray administration long gone, power in your hands as the first-ever Madam President, a great promotion from having been Madam Speaker, befitting a feminist advocate from a minority background like you...”

Her eyes sparkled: the young, ambitious Roberta Miguel would have leapt at such an opportunity. Alas, what a short-lived sparkle that was. Andrea’s untimely demise and Roberta’s newfound satisfaction in getting her hands dirty serving the American masses had opened her eyes. She was meant to be with the people, even if she couldn’t relate to them lest she be entangled in relational messiness. Wasn’t that what a true Democrat was about, power of-for-by the people, even though people had always been annoying? Not lord over them with an iron fist like some presidents she and her allies had been impeaching. Gray was their last target or hope but no one wanted to talk about that. Roberta wasn’t impressed by Mr Kelly’s ham-fisted attempts at flattery, either.

“No, thanks.” She turned away.

“It’s an offer you can’t—”

Roberta climbed to the top of the generator, straddling between two fans facing upwards.

Oliver ran behind her. “Hands off!”

But it was too late. Roberta had shoved one of her grubby sandals into the fan in front of her, followed by the other into the fan behind. She braced herself. The machine sputtered, spat out metal fragments, and came to a standstill.

Oliver stared at her. She had no shoes now. He didn’t have any footwear to spare...

Roberta whistled. A grey horse burst out from the bushes, and she slid from the generator down onto its saddle. Her horseback silhouette blended into the darkness.

A darkness reflecting the condition of her own soul.

Oliver paced about outside his team tent, revisiting the shock Roberta Miguel’s actions gave him. Even if he’d had extra sandals, he wouldn’t have given them to her, this ungrateful, primitive “administrator” whom he and the community had trusted for so long. Only tonight did he know she wasn’t on his side. Who knew, she might even feed his precious shoes into his broken generator all over again.

He muttered something. *Wait, such a thing should not be kept secret.* He entered the team tent and whispered the same to his hundred-plus followers. They, in turn, returned to their own tents and repeated to their families the speech he muttered:

“The Capitol generator was working until the honourable Roberta Miguel ruined it with a pair of sandals, but even without her support of or that of the next administrator or anybody for the matter, we’ll get back our money, we’ll get back our jobs, we’ll get back our conveniences, we’ll get back our families and friends all over the world, we’ll get back our normal lives and continue civilisation from where Providence had cruelly left it off, we’ll restart right here in D.C., the capital of the world, and we’ll never

stop trying to rebuild the generator!”